



IN THE LIGHT OF LANTERNS TOM COUNTED FIVE FIGURES.

Tom Swift and His Chest of Secrets.

Page 205

TOM SWIFT AND HIS CHEST OF SECRETS

OR

Tracing the Stolen Inventions

By

VICTOR APPLETON

AUTHOR OF

"TOM SWIFT AND HIS MOTOR CYCLE"
"TOM SWIFT AMONG THE DIAMOND MAKERS"
"TOM SWIFT AND HIS GREAT OIL GUSHER"
"THE DON STURDY SERIES"
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Tom Swift and His Chest of Secrets

CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
I. A CRASH ON THE ROOF	1
II. BIG OFFERS	12
III. DIRTY WORK	21
IV. LIBERTY BONDS	29
V. IVAN BARSKY	38
VI. FIRE	47
VII. A HURRIED EXIT	56
VIII. A SECRET LISTENER	63
IX. MARY'S MESSAGE	74
X. A QUEER STORY	81
XI. A DOUBLE PERIL	88
XII. A RING OF FIRE	96
XIII. JUST IN TIME	104
XIV. A QUEER ATTACK	113
XV. THE TRAP	122
XVI. BOUND IN DARKNESS	132
XVII. OUT OF THE CISTERN	137

CONTENTS

CHAPTER		PAGE
XVIII.	TWO DISAPPEARANCES	145
XIX.	KOKU IS FOUND	154
XX.	MANY STRANGE CLEWS	163
XXI.	SCOUTING AROUND	171
XXII.	A STRANGE MESSAGE	180
XXIII.	THE BLUE MACHINE	189
XXIV.	A NIGHT WATCH	198
XXV.	THE ROUND-UP	208

TOM SWIFT AND HIS CHEST OF SECRETS

CHAPTER I

A CRASH ON THE ROOF

THERE was a puffing as of labored breath, a shuffling of feet in the hallway, a banging and clattering sound, and then a voice cried:

"Where you have 'um, Master?"

Ned Newton looked up from his desk and glanced across the room at Tom Swift who was poring over a mass of blue prints. The young inventor smiled at his equally youthful business manager as Ned remarked:

"There's your cute little giant Koku up to some of his interesting tricks again! Sounds as if he'd caught Eradicate by the hair of his bald head and was bringing him in upside down!"

"Plague take those fellows!" muttered Tom, a look of annoyance passing over his face. "If they don't stop this everlasting clashing to see

who is going to do things around here, I'll get rid of them both! That's what I will!"

Ned Newton laughed—laughed so hard that a pencil he had been using flew out of his hand and fell to the floor, breaking the fine point the young manager had put on in order to work over the financial affairs of the Swift Construction Company. Then Ned's face sobered as he noted his broken pencil and he exclaimed:

"Oh, soapsuds!"

"Why the giggles?" asked Tom a bit impatiently. He had been buried in such deep thought that he resented the interruptions—not only the interruption of the noise outside his private office, but Ned's laughter.

"Oh, I was only laughing because you've threatened so many times to get rid of Koku and Eradicate. But you've never done it," went on Ned, "and you never will."

"No, I never will, I suppose," agreed Tom slightly chuckling. "Though they are mighty annoying at times with their everlasting——"

He did not finish the sentence, for again there came from the hall those strange sounds and once more the voice asked:

"Where you want 'um, Master?"

"It all depends, I should say, on who 'um' is," laughed Ned.

"It can't be Rad," remarked Tom, rising from

his chair to go to the door. "If it were he'd have let out a yell long ago. It's got so lately that he makes a fuss if Koku looks at him."

"Afraid he'll turn him white, I reckon," chuckled Ned.

By this time Tom Swift had opened the door, revealing that Koku, the jungle giant, alone stood there, waiting for orders. Contrary to what Ned Newton had suggested, the big man did not have in his grasp Eradicate Sampson, the old colored servant of the Swift household. Between Koku and Eradicate there was an everlasting feud, due to the fact that each one loved and wanted to serve Tom and resented the other's efforts in the same field of endeavor.

But Koku held something else—something that, when Ned caught a glimpse of it, caused the young manager to exclaim:

"My word, Tom, what's the idea of the treasure chest?"

For it was nothing less than that which the giant held up on his shoulder—a great, massive oak chest bound with heavy strips of brass. And, as if that were not enough to hold the chest together, there were in addition two strips of wrought iron around either end of it, the strips terminating in hasps which dropped over massive staples, there to be fastened with heavy brass padlocks which tinkled and clanged with

a suggestive sound as Koku stood holding the big box.

"Oh, Koku, I didn't know this had come," remarked Tom, and all his annoyance at the interruption to his thoughts passed. "I have been waiting for it."

"Jes' comed," remarked Koku, whose English left much to be desired, though he generally managed to make himself understood. "Two mans bring 'um off truck. Want to fetch 'um up here. I laff an' say Koku brung. Them mans laff say no can do. I laff two times and I give mans push and bring 'um here. Here 'um am."

"So I see," remarked Tom with gentle sarcasm. "And I suppose in refusing the offers of the truckmen who delivered my chest you knocked them seven ways or more."

"Just cast your gaze out of that window, Ned, and see if you can observe two huskies with fire in their eyes who will make a demand on the Swift Construction Company for damages caused by personal injuries from this little follower of mine. And as for you, Koku, how many times must I tell you not to go about pushing! You aren't playing football, you know!"

"Where you want 'um?" was all Koku answered, still holding the heavy chest as though

it were but a pasteboard box. "I put 'um down then I go bring up mans an' show 'um I can do!"

"You let those men alone!" and Tom laughed in spite of himself. "You've got me into trouble enough, as it is. But put the chest down there, and then go and ask my father if he feels well enough to come here."

"Boss Swift no come, I carry him," said Koku simply.

"None of that, unless he wants you to, Koku!" ordered Tom in so sharp a tone that the giant knew he must obey.

"Aw right," he murmured. He put the massive brass-bound chest down in the middle of the room, the keys, which were tied to the padlocks, jingling and clanking as he did so. Then, as the giant left the room, Ned drew his head in from the window and remarked:

"There are two huskies down there, dusting off their clothes and looking indignant."

"Just as I thought," groaned Tom. "I'll have another demand on me for monetary damages on account of Koku's confounded zeal in my behalf. Here, Ned, run down with these cigars, like a good chap, and stave off the row, will you?"

"Sure, Tom!" The young manager grabbed a handful of cigars from a box some one had

sent Tom, but which the young inventor never used, and hurried out.

Meanwhile Tom Swift, left to himself, walked over to the great new chest, and, cutting loose the keys, fitted them into the locks, there being two, and threw back the cover.

"This will hold the most valuable of my secrets until I can get the concrete storage vault made," he remarked.

He was still looking at and admiring the chest when New came back. In his hand the young man still held the cigars.

"Wouldn't they take them?" asked Tom quickly.

"I didn't get a chance to give them the smokes," was the answer. "Just as I got down there Koku came out the back door, and you should have seen those fellows make a dash for their truck. They're breaking the speed laws yet, I reckon," and Ned sat down in a chair and laughed heartily. "They seem to have had enough of Koku's pushes, Tom."

"Hang it all!" muttered Tom. "Well, I'll have to square those fellows next time I see them. Maybe they won't make any trouble."

"Judging from the way they streaked it down the road, they won't come back here unless they're hauled. But what's the idea of the treasure chest, Tom? Some new invention?"

"No, it's just a plain, strong chest. I had it made to store away my secret inventions—the formulae, plans, blue prints and so on—until I can put them properly in a vault that I'm going to construct underground." As Tom spoke he began putting into the chest a number of bundles of documents and drawings. "I had the chest made in Mansburg, and I was just wondering when they were going to deliver it when Koku brought it up," he added.

"Those plans and blue prints must be worth a lot of money," remarked Ned, with an appraising glance at them.

"Well, yes, you might say that," admitted Tom, though not at all boastfully. "The tidal engine alone, when I get it perfected, ought to bring in a pretty penny—that is, if dad and I decided to sell it."

"When you perfect it!" exclaimed Ned. "Why, it works like a charm now!"

"Yes, I know the model does," admitted Tom. "But that doesn't say it's commercially practical yet."

"To judge by some of the offers you got for even a small interest in it, I'd say it was a humdinger!" exclaimed Ned. "But then your name goes a long way, Tom. Once let it be known that your company has something new on the market, and you're overwhelmed with offers.

Take that gyroscope air flier your father helped work out——”

“Not so loud, Ned!” cautioned the young inventor. “I’m not ready to let the latest news of that get out yet. As you know, with the new stabilizer, it works on quite a different principle.”

“Right! But there’s no one around here now to catch your secrets, Tom.”

“You never know when some one is around,” was the cautious observation as the young inventor continued to pack blue prints into the chest. “It’s best to be on the safe side. We didn’t think any one was listening when you and I discussed plans for the new turbine, and yet we nearly got dished out of that.”

“That’s so—my error!” apologized Ned. “Are the plans for that going into the new chest?”

“Yes; and for my new idea that may result in automatically stopping railroad trains and preventing accidents,” went on Tom. “I have great hopes of that and also of my new mammoth telescope.”

“Telescope!” exclaimed Ned. “You haven’t said anything to me about that, Tom. What’s the idea?”

“Well, it’s pretty hazy as yet. But I have a notion that we haven’t begun to reach the limits of telescope work yet. If by means of present

instruments we can bring the moon to within apparently forty thousand miles, why can't we double the size, or at least the power of the telescopes, and make the moon seem only a few hundred miles away? Then, by taking moving pictures and enlarging them, we may be able to settle the disputed point as to whether or not the moon is inhabited. Yes, I've got a lot of work to do on my telescope, and also on the farm tractor. I've got a notion I can improve the tractor, though I guess Ford beat me to it, and holds all the tricks, for he can make them in such vast quantities that he could outsell me and underbid me, even though I could better the machine a little."

"Yes, I wouldn't advise, as your financial manager, bucking up against the Ford interests," remarked Ned dryly. "We're in pretty good shape, have a nice balance in the bank, and all that, but I want to see it stay there."

"So do I!" laughed Tom, as he continued to pack into the chest thousands of dollars' worth of valuable patent papers. "I'm not going into any wild schemes, Ned."

"I wouldn't advise it," went on the young manager. "Especially in view of what may happen soon," he added.

"What's going to happen?" asked Tom quickly and a bit apprehensively.

"Why, I thought I might soon be requested to act as best man at a certain ceremony in which the talented Tom Swift was a party of the second part, and a certain Mary Nestor party of the first part aforesaid in manner following, to wit, that is to say, and all the rest of it!"

"Cut it out!" laughed Tom, blushing slightly under his tan. "But if I ever do need a best man you'll be it, Ned."

"Thanks. I hoped as much. Well, when you get all your documents in that chest of secrets it will be worth a pretty penny, Tom."

"Chest of secrets!" laughed Tom. "That's a good name for it, Ned. Yes, quite a little fortune," he went on. "I had the chest made secure and heavy on purpose so it couldn't easily be carried away. Maybe I had it made a bit too heavy. Let's see if we can shift it out of the middle of the room, Ned."

The chest, nearly filled with documents which Tom had taken from his desk and the office safe, was not locked. The two young men attempted to lift it, but it was beyond their strength.

"We'll have to send for Koku," remarked Tom. "Though I expect him back any moment. I sent him to call dad here. He may have some papers he wants to put in the chest."

“Hark!” exclaimed Ned, raising a hand for silence.

Immediately thereafter a great crash sounded on the roof of the building—a thundering, vibrating and nerve-racking crash, and above the din a voice cried:

“Bless my steering wheel! I didn’t want to land here!”

CHAPTER II

BIG OFFERS

TOM SWIFT and Ned Newton glanced at each other. In spite of the apparent gravity of the situation the young men could not help smiling. For well they knew that voice, and they could judge what had happened.

"It's Mr. Damon!" exclaimed Ned.

"And he must have made a forced landing from an aeroplane on the roof above us!" added Tom. "Lucky for us he didn't come through."

"Lucky for him, too, I should say!"

Ned made a dash for a stairway leading to the broad, flat roof of the building that housed Tom's executive offices and also one of the shops of the Swift Construction Company. The young inventor followed his financial manager. Others of the plant—workmen, machinists, and apprentices—were also on their way to the roof.

Tom and Ned, going up a private stairway and through a scuttle, were the first to reach the scene. There a curious sight met their eyes. Seated in a small monoplane—a kind invented

by Tom Swift himself—was Mr. Wakefield Damon, a friend of the family, a very eccentric but lovable character, forever “blessing” any and everything that took his fancy.

“Hello, boys!” he greeted Tom and Ned, blinking his eyes at them in a curious fashion.

“Well, for the love of spark plugs!” cried Ned. “What happened?”

“Are you hurt?” Tom asked more practically, though a quick glance assured him that the plane was whole, though one landing wheel was slightly out of true, and that the solitary passenger was still in the small cockpit.

“Bless my porous plaster, Tom, I don’t know whether I’m hurt or not!” answered Mr. Damon. “I came down so suddenly! I was aiming to land in your regular flying field, but something went wrong with the controls—it’s a new plane, I haven’t had it long—and I find myself here.”

“Mighty lucky you are to find yourself, I’ll say,” murmured Ned, as a crowd of Tom’s men gathered about the plane on the roof.

“This smash,” remarked Tom, as he and Ned were helping the odd man from his aeroplane, “reminds me of the first time I ever saw you, Mr. Damon. You were riding a motorcycle.”

“And it tried to climb a tree with me! Bless my rubber boots, well do I remember that!”

It was owing to Mr. Damon's disgust over the accident to his motorcycle that Tom had been able to secure it for a small sum. As related in the first volume of this series, "Tom Swift and His Motor Cycle," the young inventor was started on his sensational career by the possession of this battered machine, which he repaired and got in running order. On it he had some exciting rides.

Tom was in his early manhood. He, and his aged and somewhat invalid father, an inventor of note, lived in the Swift homestead in the town of Shopton on Lake Carlopa. Tom's mother was dead, but he and his father were well looked after by Mrs. Baggert, an efficient housekeeper. Of late years Barton Swift had not taken much active part in the rapidly growing business, though Tom always consulted his father on matters of importance.

It was at the suggestion of Mary Nestor, for whom Tom had a very great admiration, that the young inventor engaged his friend and boyhood chum, Ned Newton, to look after the business matters of the Swift Construction Company. Tom never had reason to regret that decision. For with Ned to look after money matters, see to contracts, and the like, Tom and his father were left free to exercise their inventive ability.

The Swift Company had gone into many lines of activity, from building airships and aeroplanes to constructing submarines and giant cannon for the government. These brought Tom and his associates money and fame, and also hard work.

Just prior to the opening of this story Tom had developed a new drill and a system of sinking shafts for oil wells, and when, as related in "Tom Swift and His Great Oil Gusher," he successfully demonstrated how quickly he could get down to the oil-containing sand, he made another big amount of money, not only for the Swift Company, but for the Goby family as well.

It was after this that he began to think of getting together in one central place all his drawings, patent rights, secret formulae and the like. To this end he had had constructed the strong chest, and he and Ned had barely finished putting into it most of the valuable documents when the crash on the roof came.

"He doesn't seem to be hurt, Tom," remarked Garret Jackson, Tom's shop manager, as he laid Mr. Damon on a pile of coats and jackets which some workmen hastily spread on the roof.

"Hurt! Bless my doctor's bill, I'm not hurt at all!" exclaimed the odd man. "I'm shaken up, but I'm more worried about the plane than

about myself. Is it all right, Tom? I tried to avoid the chimney, but I'm afraid one wheel grazed it."

"Yes, that's what happened," replied the young inventor, as soon as he had made sure his friend was not hurt and had had time to inspect the craft. "You damaged it a little. But I can easily put on another wheel. I have some spare ones for that model."

"Have you, Tom? That's fine! Put one on and I'll fly off your roof. You may charge me storage if I stay here too long," and Mr. Damon laughed in a way which showed, better than anything else, that he had suffered no ill effects from the sudden ending of his flight.

"Are you going to trust yourself again to that plane?" asked Mr. Jackson.

"Of course I'm going to fly again!" cried the odd man. "A little bump like this doesn't disturb me. I've been in worse smash-ups; haven't I, Tom?"

"Off hand, I should say you had," was the smiling answer.

"Besides, I want to learn how to run this jigger!" cried Mr. Damon, sitting up on the pile of workmen's garments while the men gathered smilingly about him, for they all knew him. "What did I do wrong, Tom? Or is the steering gear out of order?"

"It seems to be all right," answered the young inventor, who had been looking at the mechanism. "Tell me just what happened."

"Well, as I say, I was coming over to see you. Or, if I didn't say that before, I tell you now. I have a big offer for you, Tom Swift, a most important offer. I'll get to that in a moment. But I was coming over in this plane, which I bought only yesterday, and I decided to fly across your shop and land in the meadow.

"But, just as I got here, I felt the machine dip suddenly. First I thought I had struck an air pocket, but I didn't have time really to decide what it was before I came down with a crash. Luckily I was able to straighten her out a little before I struck, so I made a slanting landing. Otherwise I might have gone through the roof."

"And right down on our heads!" exclaimed Ned. "Mighty glad you didn't!"

"So am I," said Mr. Damon. "But what's wrong, Tom? I want to know so that the same thing won't happen again."

"I guess you forgot that you were in a monoplane instead of a biplane, Mr. Damon," he answered. "You banked too much on the turn."

"That's it, Tom! I remember now! I was making the curve to head straight for the meadow, and it was then a sort of side slip came."

"Yes," remarked the young inventor, "you

spilled too much air from beneath your wing tips. You see in a biplane, with two surfaces, the air is held in a sort of pocket and you can afford to make a sharper bank on the turn. But in monoplanes you must be more careful."

"I will, after this," promised Mr. Damon, as he arose and walked about, albeit a bit gingerly as though making sure he had no broken bones or strained tendons.

"Here, Koku!" called Tom to his giant helper. "Hold up this plane while some of the men take off the damaged wheel."

"Sure, Master, Koku do," was the reply.

"Go on!" cried another voice. "It doan need no big fat giant to lift a li'l machine like dat! I'll do it fo' you, Massa Tom!"

An old colored man with a fringe of white hair around his black pate pushed through the crowd of workmen toward the giant who was already preparing to tilt the plane so the wheel could be removed.

"You go or Koku push you!" warned the giant with a threatening look at Eradicate Sampson.

"Huh! You go on!" was the contemptuous response, and there might have been a battle then and there had not Tom interposed.

"Rad," he said, "you let Koku attend to lifting the plane. It's a bit heavy in spite of its

small size. You go down to the storeroom and bring up the extra wheel."

"Hah, you ain't so smart as you t'inks you is!" taunted the colored man as he departed on his errand, satisfied now that he could help his young master.

"They'll soon have the machine in shape for you, Mr. Damon, if you insist on trusting yourself to it again," said Tom, as he gave instructions to his men. "And while you are waiting, came on down and talk to dad. He's always glad to see you."

"All right, Tom, I'll do that. At the same time I can attend to the matter that brought me over here. Bless my Liberty Bonds, Tom, but it's very important! Big business, you know!"

"Ned and dad and I are always ready to talk business," remarked Tom, as he led the way to his office in which stood the new chest of secrets. Mr. Swift was there, looking over some papers. At the sight of the chest Mr. Damon exclaimed:

"Packing up to move, Tom?"

"No, just taking precautions so I won't lose any of my secrets," replied the young inventor. "There are so many of these plans and patents now that dad and I thought we ought to have them in one place, where we could easily get at them in a hurry if need be."

"That's right," chimed in Mr. Swift. "You

know I'm not as young as I once was, Damon. I can't expect to live much longer, and I want everything in shape for Tom when I go."

"Nonsense! Bless my life insurance policy!" laughed Mr. Damon, "you'll be here for many years, Mr. Swift. And lest you may be losing interest in life, listen to this offer that I bring you.

"Tom, you remember Mr. Blythe?" he asked, turning to the young inventor.

"Surely! The man who got so excited when he found what my oil well drill had done?"

"The same, yes. Well, he called on me yesterday. He introduced some capitalists—big men they are, too, moneyed interests of New York and all that. Mr. Blythe introduced them to me, and the upshot of it was, Tom Swift, that they authorized me to make you a big offer for certain rights in your tidal engine and mill machinery patents. Now look here, Tom, there are millions in it for you—millions! Why, bless my bank book, it's the biggest offer you ever listened to, Tom Swift!"

CHAPTER III

DIRTY WORK

MR. DAMON was easily excited and quite likely to become enthusiastic over small matters. None knew this better than Tom Swift, and that, perhaps, accounted for the calm manner in which the young inventor received the news of "big interests" being after some of his ideas.

"Well, Tom, what do you say to it?" asked the odd man, as he strode about the private office, all trace of his recent crash having disappeared. "Shall I tell my friend Mr. Blythe to bring over his men who have the money?"

"No," answered Tom slowly. "Just as much obliged to you, Mr. Damon. But don't do it."

"What, Tom Swift? Do you mean you won't sell a part interest in your tidal engine and mill machinery for—say a million dollars?"

"Look here, Mr. Damon," laughed Tom. "If Mr. Blythe or his friends were to walk in here now and lay down a million dollars in cash, or certified checks, I'm not saying but

what I might accept their offer. A million dollars is a lot of money.

"I hardly believe, however, they would make a bona fide offer of anything like that amount for something of which they can have heard only rumors, for neither of those inventions is on the market yet—in fact, the mill machinery is hardly past the experimental stage."

"Well, Tom," slowly remarked the odd character, "maybe they wouldn't exactly give you a *million* in cold cash. I may have been a little hasty in saying that. But Blythe certainly said there would be millions in it."

"Maybe he meant for *him*," suggested Ned pointedly.

"Hardly," observed Tom. "Mr. Blythe is a square man and you can depend on what he says. But, as a matter of fact, I prefer to develop these inventions myself rather than sell them, or even an interest in them, at this stage of the game. What do you say, Dad?" and he turned toward his father.

"I agree with you, Tom," answered the elder inventor. "I haven't gone as deeply into these two latest ideas of yours as I have into some of the other things, but from what I have seen I believe they will be very valuable, and will help along human progress.

"We must think of that, as well as of the

money we might make in certain inventions. It may be that this syndicate of men wishes to keep off the market something that might displace some present method they control. And it might be that Tom's ideas would help save human life. In that case it would be your duty, Tom, to develop the matter, even if you never got a cent for it."

"That's the way I feel about it," said Tom.

"Then we don't go into this?" asked Ned, who, as usual on occasions like this, was making shorthand notes of the talk to be preserved for future reference.

"No, we'll just drop it," decided Tom. "I'll go on trying to perfect the two devices, and later on, Mr. Damon, if I decide to sell an interest, I'll let you know and you can tell Mr. Blythe. Shall I send him a formal declination through Ned or will you tell him? I, personally, think that as long as the offer has come indirectly through you, you had better be the messenger."

"Oh, bless my ketchup bottle, Tom! you aren't going to turn down that offer like this, are you?"

"I'm afraid I am, Mr. Damon."

"And you agree with him, Mr. Swift?"

"Whatever my son says I shall stand by," answered the old inventor, with a smile. "No

hard words to you, Mr. Damon, you understand, but——”

“Oh, I’m not interested in it—only to help Tom!” was the hasty answer. “It doesn’t mean anything to me. I’m not working on a commission. All I want is to learn to run my new little plane. But I’m not going to let you stand in your own light like this, Tom. I’m going to tell Blythe to send those men over to see you!”

“No use!” laughed Tom, waving his hands. “I won’t be so discourteous, of course, as not to see them, but I won’t do any business with them.”

“Oh, maybe you will,” suggested Mr. Damon hopefully. “You don’t know yet any details of their offer, you know.”

At that moment another noise was heard outside the room.

“I tell master!” boomed out the voice of Koku, the giant.

“Go ’way, big man!” cried Eradicate. “Didn’t he send me fo’ de wheel an’ ain’t de wheel on now? I’m gwin tell him dat de plane am ready to run offen de roof.”

“No! I tell!” disputed Koku.

“They’re at it again!” murmured Ned.

“Shivering hoptoads!” cried Tom testily. “If they don’t stop this everlasting contention I’ll fire them both!”

He strode to the door just as Eradicate's voice, tense, calm, and ominous exclaimed:

"Look yeah, big man! I's gwin in an' tell Massa Tom 'bout de plane bein' ready. An' ef you all doan stand to one side I's gwin to bust you a lambaste in de nose wif dis yeah monkey wrench."

The dire threat evidently had its effect, for when Tom opened the door Eradicate stood there, proudly smiling, and Koku, vanquished by the firm bearing of his small enemy, was hurrying around the corner.

"Yes, sah, Massa Tom," said the colored man, with a broad grin as he fingered the large monkey wrench in his hands, "I's done come to tell you dat Mistah Damon's machine am all salubrious now an' he kin ride it down offen de roof if so be as he likes."

"Thanks, Rad! I'm going to do that at once!" broke in the odd man.

"Well, Mr. Damon, we'll leave it to you, then, to communicate with Mr. Blythe," Tom said. "We won't send any letter."

"No, don't turn the offer down just yet," pleaded Tom's friend from Waterford. "You may regret it. Wait a few days. Now I'll see if I can do a little better with the plane than I did at first."

"We'll go up and see that you get started

right," said Tom. "I'll leave you in charge of the chest of secrets, dad, until I come back. I have about all my papers in, but I thought you might like to put in some of yours."

"Yes, Tom, I should, thank you. Rad, I'll ask you to help me gather them up from my office."

Knowing his chest of valuable papers would be safe in the care of his father and Eradicate, the young inventor went with Ned and Mr. Damon to the roof.

The workmen had put on a new wheel and made one or two other repairs to the slightly damaged plane. A test of the motor showed that it was in fine running order, and Mr. Damon took his seat in the small cockpit.

"I suppose it's all right to take off from here, isn't it, Tom?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," replied the young inventor. "I've often done so with bigger planes than this."

The roof over Tom's office and the adjoining shop had been built with special adaptability to aeroplanes, and a little later, when the engine had throbbed and roared after starting, Mr. Damon had no difficulty in getting into the air.

The little plane gathered speed, sped across the roof, and, reaching the edge, dipped down a moment and then sprang into the air like a

veritable bird, which it resembled more than it did anything else.

Mr. Damon was observed to lean over the edge of the cockpit, wave his hand and shout something down to those on the roof.

"Did you hear what he said?" asked Tom of his business manager.

"No; but it probably was that he'll send Blythe over to see you," chuckled Ned.

"He needn't; it will be of no use. I'm going to work on the tidal engine and the mill machinery for my own 'purposes,'" declared the young inventor.

Those on the roof watched for a time the soaring little plane, becoming smaller as it receded from view.

"He seems to know how to run it all right," observed Ned, as he and Tom prepared to return to the office.

"Oh, yes, he just made that one mistake," answered Tom. "He's pretty careful as a rule. But I'll never forget the look on his face as he sat on the ground after his motorcycle tried to climb a tree. It was the funniest thing I ever saw!" and Tom laughed at the recollection.

Mr. Swift was putting into the great oak chest some of his papers when the young men rejoined him. As Rad closed the lid and Tom snapped the locks, the telephone rang.

"I'll answer," offered Ned. "And shall I have Koku come here, Tom, and put that chest in the corner?"

"Yes, you'd better. We can't budge it."

"I'll move it!" rashly offered Eradicate, but a tug at the handle on one end showed him the futility of pitting his feeble strength against the box. "By golly, she suah do stick to de flo'!" he gasped. "But ef I had mah strength I could do it!"

"Hello! Hello!" Ned was saying into the telephone. The room grew quiet and Tom heard his manager exclaim:

"You don't mean it! No! The hound! Say, wait until I get over there!"

"What is it?" asked Tom, thinking perhaps some accident had befallen Mr. Damon. "What's the matter, Ned?"

"Dirty work!" was the answer. "Dirty work, that's what the matter is, Tom! My father has been falsely accused! I must go to him at once!"

CHAPTER IV ,

LIBERTY BONDS

NED NEWTON turned back to the telephone, from which he had moved but a moment to answer his chum and employer, and to his father, on the other end of the wire, the young manager said:

"I'll be with you right away, Dad! They're not going to get by with anything like that—not in a thousand years! Don't let them bluff you. It's just a rotten bad mistake, that's all. I'll be right with you. What's that? Will Tom let me come? Well, say——"

"Tell him I'm coming with you!" shouted the young inventor vigorously as he caught the import of what his chum had said, and his voice was so loud that it carried to the other end of the wire.

"He heard you," said Ned. "Thanks, Tom. Yes, Dad, I'll be right along."

He clicked the receiver back into place and with burning indignation on his face turned to Tom and Mr. Swift.

"Is your father in trouble, Ned?" asked Barton Swift. "If so you must say to him that Tom and I will do all in our power for him."

"Thanks," and Ned's voice was a bit broken as he spoke the word, for he was greatly affected, as they all noted.

"Tell me in a few words what it is," suggested Tom. "I want to know so we can go prepared to help him. Maybe we'd better stop and get Mr. Plum." Ralph Plum was a lawyer of Shopton who attended to legal matters for the Swifts.

"I guess maybe we'll need a lawyer," answered Ned dejectedly. "For my father has been arrested."

"Arrested!" exclaimed the Swifts in a breath.

"Yes. But of course he's innocent," and Ned proudly threw up his head.

"No question about that, old scout!" said Tom, clapping his chum on the back. "But what's the nature of the charge? Tell me so I can telephone to Plum," and he went over to the instrument on his desk.

"He is accused by Renwick Fawn of the theft of a good many thousands of dollars' worth of Liberty Bonds," answered Ned. "Dad didn't have time to give me all the story over the telephone, but several times before this he has spoken to me about mysterious thefts of these

securities from the National Investment Company, where he is employed, you know. Dad spoke of these thefts, and even mentioned that the firm had engaged a private detective to try to trace the thief. Now, like a bombshell, father is accused and arrested."

"It's all a mistake, of course," said Tom. "Oh, Operator, get me Main 1576, please, and in a hurry if you can. Of course it is all a mistake," and he resumed his talk to his chum.

"But think what the accusation means to dad, to mother and to me even though it is afterward proved—as it will be—that my father had nothing to do with the matter!" burst out Ned. "He is disgraced forever because that sneak Fawn thinks he knows it all! Oh, there has been dirty work all right!"

"Who is this fellow Fawn?" Tom wanted to know.

"A new manager they got at the Investment Company," replied Ned. "I have heard dad speak of him. He's one of these efficiency birds—everything done by clockwork, plenty of pep, a go-getter, and all that rot! I'd like to go get him! But, oh, the disgrace to dad!"

"Don't worry about that!" exclaimed Mr. Swift. "No one who knows your father can ever think him disgraced, even if he were ar-

rested for the theft of all the Liberty Bonds Uncle Sam ever put out!"

"Right-o!" cried Tom. "Oh, hello, is this Mr. Plum's office? Yes, I want to talk to him—very important—Tom Swift speaking!"

The name of Swift worked like magic, even in such a ceremonious office as that of Mr. Plum, and a moment later Tom was pouring out a quick statement of the matter, suggesting that the lawyer hold himself in readiness to go with Tom and Ned to the office of the investment concern where, it appeared, Mr. Newton was being held in custody, preparatory to being arraigned before a police officer for commitment to a cell.

"I'll call for you in my electric runabout," finished Tom. "What's that—can it go? Mr. Plum, when that car was built it was the speediest one on the road, and it has never yet been passed! Yes, we'll be there in a jiffy!"

Turning to his chum as he hung up the receiver, Tom remarked:

"Now come on, Ned, we'll get a move on. But we'll take a few sinews of war with us!"

Quickly he opened the big chest he had locked, and from an inner compartment in it he extracted a sheaf of crisp bills whose yellow color told of high denominations.

"They always have to accept bail in these

cases, Ned," remarked the young inventor, "and cash always talks. Your dad will be able to sleep at home to-night."

"Thanks," murmured Ned, and, though he did not say it, he had had a horrible vision of his beloved father spending the night in a cell like some convicted felon.

"Look after the treasure chest, Dad!" called Tom to his father as he hurried out with his chum.

"I certainly will if you've got any more cash in it," said the aged inventor, with a smile. "I didn't know you planned to keep money in there, Tom."

"I don't—not as a rule. But this was some that came in when Ned wasn't around and I didn't have time to bank it, and it didn't belong in the office safe. Now, Ned, hustle's the word!"

Tom Swift had not misnamed his electric run-about. Though it was one of his earlier inventions, it was still in excellent shape and it was just the kind of machine for a quick, speedy trip. Running to the garage where it was kept, the two young men leaped in and soon the motors were humming as the "juice" from the storage battery was turned into them. Tom rounded a corner of the drive on two wheels, it seemed, and was soon off down the road, causing Ned to jam on his hat.

"We'll stop and pick up Plum," said Tom, in his chum's ear as they whizzed along. "Then we'll go right to the office of this concern. We'll have this thing over before it's fairly begun. Is there anything more you can tell me as we travel?"

"Not much," Ned answered. "You know dad has been with this concern for a long time. It was only recently that I heard him speak of this new manager and his ways. It seems Fawn took a dislike to dad, who is a bit old-fashioned in some of his ideas. Not enough pep, I suppose, for the dirty hound!

"And, as I told you, there has been going on the stealing of Liberty Bonds for some time. But as this wasn't in my father's department he didn't think much about it. He has charge of the mortgages. Then, like a bolt out of the blue, they accused him to-day—even pretended to find some of the missing bonds in his desk.

"Of course he indignantly denied the accusation and asked for permission to telephone me. Fawn didn't even want to allow that, so dad told me over the wire, but the president of the concern put his foot down and said I should be informed. Now you know as much as I do."

"Which isn't much," commented Tom. "It's a case for Plum all right. We'll be at his office in another minute."

They found the lawyer waiting for them. Despite all his other legal work, it would never do to neglect any of the Swift family interests.

"Outline it to me quickly, Tom," said Mr. Plum, as he got into the electric runabout. This Tom did, giving a brief account of the case as related by Ned.

"We'll waive an immediate arraignment and have him admitted to bail," decided the lawyer as they neared the office where Mr. Newton was detained a prisoner.

Father and son met and shook hands—hard. Tom nodded to some of the men of the investment company whom he knew and with whom he had done business. He noted one self-important individual walking up and down. It was Mr. Fawn, he guessed, and this was confirmed a minute later when this sleek person said:

"Well, Mr. Newton, you have had your way—your son is here, and some other friends, I presume. Now I demand that this man be locked up on the charge I make against him," he went on. "Deputy, you can do your duty."

"Just a moment," put in Mr. Plum suavely. "I represent the defendant in this case. I ask to examine the warrant."

"You can't see it!" snapped out Mr. Fawn.

"Oh, yes, he can," said the deputy sheriff who

had served it. "That is always the privilege of the defendant's lawyer."

"Oh, well, all right," snapped the accusing manager of the concern.

Mr. Plum glanced over the document, which was brief, and, in effect, charged Mr. Newton with embezzling, converting to his own use, stealing, taking and carrying away certain valuable property of the National Investment Company, to wit Liberty Bonds to the value of thirty-thousand dollars.

"This is a bailable offense," said the lawyer. "We ask to be taken before a magistrate with the power of fixing bail."

"He ought to be taken to jail—that's where he ought to be taken! And he would be if I had my way!" snapped Mr. Fawn.

"That will do, Mr. Fawn," sternly said the president of the concern, Amos Bell. "This is a very serious matter," he went on. "Mr. Newton is an old friend of mine. I must insist that strict justice be done him."

"Thank you," said Ned's father feelingly.

"He has a right to bail," said the deputy. "Judge Klein is sitting at the court house now. I can take him before him."

"Then we'll go at once," said Mr. Plum.

A little later they were before the bar of justice—Mr. Newton a little pale, but standing

firm and upright. Ned flushed and indignant, with many a vindictive look at the manager of the investment company. Tom was clutching the bundle of notes in his pocket. The lawyer seemed to take it all as a matter of course.

"What is this case?" asked the old and learned judge, and when it had been explained and when he had read the accusation in the warrant, he said:

"I take it that you do not wish to plead now."

"Yes, your honor, we do!" interposed Mr. Plum. "I wish to enter a plea of not guilty for my client. We waive arraignment now, and ask that he be admitted to bail, which we are prepared to furnish in any amount."

"Um," murmured the court. "I see he is accused of taking bonds to the value of thirty-three thousand dollars. I believe I must fix bail at ten thousand dollars."

There was a gasp from Ned. Mr. Newton seemed to turn a trifle paler. Tom whispered hoarsely to his chum:

"Great bean pots! I brought only five thousand dollars with me!"

CHAPTER V

IVAN BARSKY

MR. PLUM did not seem startled, nor even much impressed, by the judge's announcement of the large amount of bail he would require to set Mr. Newton free. Perhaps the lawyer was accustomed to such matters for his clients. At any rate, as Tom said afterward, "he never turned a hair," but turned to Mr. Newton and asked:

"Are you prepared to furnish that amount of bail?"

"Why, no, I'm afraid I am not," was the hesitating answer.

"What's going to happen, Tom?" whispered Ned to his chum. "Do you think dad will have to be locked up?"

"No, I think there must be some way out," replied Tom. "Great hoptoads! I never thought we'd need more than five thousand dollars."

"That's an awful lot of money to get on a moment's notice," sighed Ned.

"The five thousand's about all the cash we have on hand just at present," stated Tom Swift. "But of course we can raise a lot more. The question is, though, can we do it in time? Let's see what Mr. Plum is saying."

The lawyer was addressing the court.

"I suppose," he said, "your honor will be content with a real estate bond or that of a surety company?"

"Either one, Mr. Plum," was the answer.

Turning to Tom the lawyer asked:

"Are you prepared to go security for Mr. Newton in this amount?"

"Yes, or twice the amount, if necessary," Tom answered. "But I have only five thousand in cash here with me——"

There was a gasp of surprise from some spectators in court, and the judge and the prosecutor smiled at one another.

"But my father and I will sign a bail bond in any amount," Tom went on eagerly.

"I fancy that will satisfy the court. And you too, Mr. Prosecutor, will it not?" asked the lawyer, nodding to the county prosecutor, to whose lot it would fall to try the case against Mr. Newton, if it went to trial.

"If the Swift firm signs a bond I'll be satisfied," said Mr. Nixon, the prosecutor.

"What about us?" burst out Mr. Fawn.

"Don't we have something to say in this matter? I don't want that man to go free. He stole a lot of our Liberty Bonds."

"Order! Order!" called the court constables, and the judge banged with his gavel.

"You have nothing to say in this matter," said the judge to Mr. Fawn. "The amount of bail has been fixed sufficiently high, and if a bond is furnished this defendant will go free until his trial, no matter what *you* think about it."

Abashed, the manager of the investment company slunk back in his seat and Mr. Plum conferred for a few moments in whispers with the judge and the prosecutor. The upshot of it was that Tom hurried off in the electric runabout and brought his father to the court house. Mr. Swift and Tom signed the bail bond, pledging themselves to pay to the county the sum of ten thousand dollars in the event that Mr. Newton was not on hand to stand trial when called; and the matter was ended for the time being.

"May I go now?" asked Ned's father, who was in a very nervous state over it all.

"You may, indeed," said the judge courteously. "Your friends have gone bail for you."

"I—I thank you—very much," faltered Mr. Newton, and then he and Ned walked out a lit-

tle ahead of the others, for Ned was affected, too.

However, they soon recovered their spirits, and when they were in the runabout, which was larger than the name implies, Mr. Newton with a sad smile, turned to Tom and asked:

"How does it seem to associate with criminals?"

"I don't know!" laughed the young inventor. "I haven't been with any yet."

"Thanks!" replied Ned's father. "I suppose I needn't assure you, my friends, that I am innocent of this charge?" he added.

"You don't need to say a word!" cried Tom.

"But what is it all about, Dad?" asked Ned. "What's the game, anyhow, and why have they picked you for the goat?"

"I don't know," was the sober answer. "I can't tell. I wish I could. All I know is that the Liberty Bonds have been stolen—at least, so Fawn says—and the fellow accuses me."

"I wouldn't be surprised if he had stolen them himself!" burst out Ned.

"Be careful, son," warned his father in a low voice. "Don't get rash. But what will the next move be in this matter?" he asked the lawyer.

"Oh, your case won't come up for trial for several months," was the answer. "Not until

fall, anyhow. In the meanwhile, if you wish, I will look into it for you and prepare a defense."

"I was going to ask you to, Mr. Plum," put in Tom. At the same time he gave the lawyer a glance which told that astute legal man that Mr. Newton was to be at no expense in the affair. As a matter of fact, Mr. Plum was under a yearly retainer to look after all the Swift interests.

"Then perhaps, Mr. Newton, you had better come to my office and talk the matter over," suggested Mr. Plum. So he and the late prisoner were deposited in town, and Tom, his father and Ned went back to the shop.

"Well, a lot has happened in the last couple of hours," remarked Ned, as he watched his friend put back into the chest the five thousand dollars which had not been used.

"I should say so!" agreed Tom. "I think we might as well knock off work for the day, Ned. I sha'n't need you any longer, and I guess you'll be glad to get home and comfort your mother."

"I will. I telephoned her from the court house that dad would not have to sleep in a cell. But she'll want to hear all the particulars. I'll be on hand in the morning."

"Take your time, old man. There's nothing

special on. And on your way out please send Koku here and I'll get him to shift this chest."

Ned looked at the substantially bound box and smiled faintly.

"Some chest, I'll say," he observed. "And when you get all your patent papers and blue prints and other drawings in it, Tom, it will be a regular chest of secrets."

"So you observed before, Ned. And let me add, the chest of secrets will be a mighty valuable one."

Ned went off and a few minutes later Koku came in, grining broadly to think that he was needed to help his master. With ease he moved the heavy chest and its valuable contents to a small room opening out of the main office where Tom worked.

"Nobody but Koku move 'um big box like that!" exclaimed the giant a bit proudly when the transfer had been made.

"Better not let Rad hear you say that," chuckled Tom.

"Pooh! Rad! Blow 'um head over 'um's ears!" grunted the giant.

That evening Tom and his father discussed the accusation against Mr. Newton, though as they had heard few particulars there was little that could be said except that unbounded faith in him was expressed.

Tom was in his office early the next morning—much earlier than usual, in fact, for he wanted to work on a new idea in regard to his plan for stopping trains automatically so that collisions or other accidents would be avoided. It was Tom's hope that this invention could eventually be applied to his powerful electric locomotive, about which details have been given in another volume.

Tom was soon deep in a mass and maze of figures, computing the power needed to stop such an immense force as was represented by his big electric machine. He was considering a wireless attachment to bring automatically into play the stopping force when Eradicate shuffled into the room. The colored man was chuckling.

"Well, what is it now, Rad?" asked Tom, not altogether pleased at being interrupted.

"Ha! Ha! Dat Koku giant, he sleepin' yit!" chuckled Rad.

"Is that all you come in to tell me—that Koku is sleeping yet?" exclaimed Tom, a bit wrathfully.

"He suah sleep!" went on Rad. "I git ahead ob him. I's de early worm dat tickles de birds dis mawnin'."

"What do you mean—early birds and worms?" and Tom smiled in spite of himself. "No one is going fishing, is there?"

"I doan know ef he's gwin fishin' or not, Massa Tom, but he's outside waitin' to come in."

"Who is?" the young inventor inquired.

"Man whut wants to see you."

"Good night, Rad! Why didn't you say it was a visitor instead of gassing away about Koku sleeping and worms and birds and all that? Though I suppose you're so proud of having gotten ahead of that giant of mine you can't help feeling good."

"Das right, Massa Tom!" chuckled Eradicate Sampson. "I done fool dat giant dish yeah mawnin'. But heah's de letter he done gif me fo' you," and the colored man extended a card.

Tom accepted the card and holding it to the light read inscribed the name.

"Um—Ivan Barsky!" murmured the young inventor, casting his memory back over many names representing many men to see if this one fitted in anywhere. "I don't seem to recall him," he said.

"He done tole me dat he's a stranger to you all," confided Rad. "But he says it's mighty 'portant business."

"Perhaps it is—to him," chuckled Tom, who was accustomed to having many strangers call on him for help or to ask him to lend his talents toward perfecting some crazy invention. "Well, Rad, show him in."

"Yas, sah," and the colored man shuffled out, to return presently ushering in a man at whom Tom shot a quick look. The youth saw before him a man of short stature but powerful build. He had a shock of black, bushy hair, and it was difficult to tell where his hair left off and his beard began, the latter also being black and bushy.

"The name Ivan was right," thought Tom. "He's a Russian all the way through."

"Mr. Swiftski?" asked the man in questioning tones, and with a trace of surprise, seemingly.

"You can leave off the *ski*," said Tom. "But I'm Mr. Swift."

"Pardon—but eet is that I do not the talk of your country know so well. In my talk there are so many who are like that. But your pardon I again ask—eet is to see so young a man that I am taken by astonishment."

"You're a pretty slick article," said Tom to himself. "I don't know that I'm going to like you, but I'll give you one more chance."

CHAPTER VI

FIRE

"Sit down," said Tom, realizing that he had not as yet extended this ordinary courtesy to his visitor. "What can I do for you?" he went on.

"You are the one I want to see—yes?" inquired Ivan Barsky, in laborious English, halting for many of his words.

"Well, I'm Tom Swift," was the answer.

"I have documents to Tom Swift," went on the man. "But I had—what you say—expected to see an older personage."

"Oh, I guess I'm old enough," replied Tom, with a smile. "But my father is older. However, he has retired from the active business of the concern, so I reckon you'll have to deal with me."

"It is of a pleasure to do so, I assure you," and the man smiled, showing his white teeth amid the blackness of his beard. "Please to read these."

He extended to Tom a sheaf of letters and

documents, which appeared to be epistles of introduction. Some were written in what Tom recognized as Russian and bore imposing stamps. These last, with a smile, the inventor passed back to Mr. Barsky saying:

"These don't mean anything to me."

"They vouch for me in my country—Russia," was the reply. "They are from—what shall I call heem—the Central Committee."

"I don't know much about Russian affairs," said Tom. "But I'll see what these letters in English have to say. But before I go on, what is it you want of me? If it is to help you finance an invention, I tell you now I will take on nothing new. If it is to work on some machine you have started, that, too, is out of the question. So it may save your time, and mine, also, if I tell you this."

"Thank you, I have nothing of these," said the visitor. "Eet is that I wish to work for you. I am an expert—what you call—mechee-chanic," and he put several unneeded syllables in the word. "Also I make those what you call—models."

"Oh, a pattern-maker!" exclaimed Tom. "I understand. Well, excuse me and I'll look over your credentials."

He found several letters from well known firms in the United States, saying that Ivan

Barsky had worked for them and had been most satisfactory. He was spoken of as a good mechanic and model-maker.

One letter rather raised Tom's suspicions, for at the conclusion it stated:

"We do not vouch for the morals of Ivan Barsky, though, as far as we have observed, he has a quiet, orderly disposition."

"I reckon that was written by some secretary who feared he was dealing with a Bolshevik," thought Tom. "Well, we may have some of that ilk in the shop, but as long as they mind their own business I can't say anything. It's a part of their religion, I guess; and I don't believe Bolshevism will ever get a hold here. However, if I do take on this chap—and I may, for I need a model-maker—I'll keep my eye on him."

Turning to his visitor, Tom handed back the letters and said:

"These speak very well of you—as a workman."

The man may have caught Tom's hidden meaning, for he burst out with:

"That is all I am offering you—my talents as a worker. For the rest, eet is my own affair!"

"Exactly," agreed Tom. "Well, I'm inclined to give you a trial, for we need some extra help just now. Wait, I'll see if my father is up yet."

Going to the telephone that was connected with his father's own room, Tom noticed that the door leading into the small room where he had stored his chest of secrets was open, leaving the heavy box in full view. Tom closed the door, though not before he had caught the dark and snapping eyes of his visitor fixed on the chest.

"Rad must have opened that door," thought Tom, a trifle put out by the incident. "I must tell him to be more careful. He is getting old and careless. But I hate to get rid of the faithful fellow."

Mr. Swift was up, and he told Tom that he would come down and talk to the Russian. In spite of the latter's labored English—he pronounced all save a few words very well, except for a peculiar intonation—Ivan Barsky was able to give a good account of himself. He answered Mr. Swift's questions intelligently and showed that he had been well apprenticed in machinist work and in the making of models and patterns.

"A model-maker is what I'd really take him on for, if you think it's wise to hire him," said Tom to his father in a low voice as they dis-

cussed the matter in the far end of the office. "I am working on the new automatic stop invention, and a great many models will be needed. Our men are busy on other matters. We might give this fellow a trial."

"Well, Tom, you know I don't usually interfere in the shop matters," said Mr. Swift. "I appreciate the fact that you want to get your new invention started. But I would think twice before I hired this man once."

"Why Dad?"

"Well, for one thing, I don't like his looks."

"I don't, either. But we have just as dangerous and anarchistic-looking fellows out in the other shops."

"I know, Tom, but they have been with us for years."

"Yes. But when they first came their appearance was against them. So, if it's all the same to you, I'll put this Barsky to work. But I'll tell Jackson to keep an eye on him."

"All right. But it's against my better judgment," and Mr. Swift shook his head as he glanced toward the foreigner. "Still, he may do good work for you, and speed is essential just now. But have him watched."

"I will, Dad. And now I won't trouble you and further. Here comes Ned, and we'll get started on the daily grind."

Mr. Swift, who was writing a book on certain mechanical principles, was glad to be released so he could go to his literary labors. After his father's departure Tom called a man from the shop and sent his strange caller out to be put to work.

"Who is his Royal Whiskerisky?" asked Ned, as he put on his office coat and took his place at his desk.

"His name is Barsky—Ivan Barsky," replied Tom. "I've just hired him," and he gave a brief story of the caller.

"Hum—Barsky," mused Ned, with a smile. "Well, all I have to say is that I hope his bite isn't as bad as his bark-sky!" and he put his arm in front of his face to ward off a missile which he expected Tom would throw at him following this atrocious joke.

"Men have been shot at sunrise for less than that," chuckled the young inventor. "However, that reminds me, I must tell Jackson to keep his weather eye peeled for this chap. I don't want him walking off with any valuable templates."

He sent for the foreman, giving him some instructions about the new employee, and Mr. Jackson said:

"I'll look after him, Tom. I saw him go into the pattern shop and sized him up as a tough

customer. Though sometimes those fellows do mighty good work. And, as you say, we do need an extra man or two."

Then while Ned plunged into the financial affairs of the company, which was his department, Tom and his foreman went over certain matters that needed looking after. For the Swift Construction Company did a certain amount of manufacturing, and orders were heavy at this season of the year. So it was not until nearly noon that Tom found a chance to ask his chum:

"How's your father? Did he get over the shock?"

"Somewhat," answered Ned.

"Of course he isn't going back there to work?" went on Tom.

"I should say not! He doesn't know yet what to do. In fact, he's like a man without a country."

"Why not bring him here?" suggested Tom quickly. "Jackson tells me that they are rushed out in the shop on certain lines. This will mean more office work, Ned, and I'm sure you've already got all you can handle. I'd be glad to have your father here—that is, if he'd like to come."

"Oh, I'm sure he would, Tom, only——"

"Only what?"

"I know he wouldn't like to think that you'd taken him on out of charity."

"Stow that talk!" broke in Tom. "That's all nonsense! We need an expert accountant in addition to you, Ned. And while I can't offer your father as responsible a position as he held with the investment concern, still I'd be glad to have him come here."

"He'll come, Tom, I'll guarantee that. I'll telephone him."

So it was arranged, and that afternoon Mr. Newton was given a desk near that of his son in the office.

For several days wheels were rapidly humming in the Swift shops. As Tom had said, orders were coming in with a rush, and this, together with work on new inventions, kept the whole place busy.

"How's your Bolshevik coming on, Tom?" asked Ned one day.

"Oh, Barsky? Why, he seems to be doing very well, so Jackson tells me," was the answer. "He minds his own business and he's a regular wizard at pattern making. He hasn't had a chance to show what sort of a machinist he is, but I reckon he'll do. In fact, Jackson says, in spite of his rather terrorizing appearance, that the man is a find."

"Glad of it," replied the young manager.

"It's always a sort of satisfaction to find you've misjudged a man on the right side. Now in regard to this order from the Simplex Supply Company, if we ship them a hundred gross of those dashers that ought to keep them supplied for a month, and we can then use the machinery to turn out those candy-wrapping machines for the Cocoa Company."

"All right, Ned, I'll leave that to you. I've got troubles of my own here. Hello, that can't be the noon whistle, can it?" cried Tom, as a blast smote the air. He looked up at the clock on the wall, noting it was barely eleven, and then Ned, after a glance from the window, cried:

"It's the fire alarm, Tom! There's a blaze in the pattern shop!"

A moment later several voices took up the shouts of:

"Fire! Fire! Fire!"

CHAPTER VII

A HURRIED EXIT

WHILE a fire is always a dangerous and alarming matter in a big shop or a factory, that contingency has been thought of and plans made to meet the emergency. It was this way in the shops of the Swift Construction Company. They had organized a fire-fighting force, and in each shop there was a reel of hose in addition to several chemical extinguishers, the result of Tom's own inventive genius.

Besides this, a series of whistle alarms had been worked out; a certain number of blasts on the big steam siren giving the location of the blaze. And it was the booming out of this whistle that now sent out the alarm.

"Come on, Ned!" Tom cried.

Mr. Newton, dropping his books, ran with the young men.

"It's in the pattern shop, all right!" cried Tom as he sped along. "I hope it doesn't get to those new models Barsky has been working

on for my train-stopping device. He's got some of my original drawings out there."

Every one connected with the Swift enterprises knew the menace of fire, and when that whistle blew every man and boy dropped what he was doing and rushed to the location of the blaze.

Eradicate was driving an old horse hitched to a cultivator in the garden, and when he heard the whistle the old colored man slapped the reins down on his animal's back and shouted:

"G'lang! Git a move on! We's got to help put out dat fiah!"

But it was impossible to get up any speed with a cultivator, the pointed teeth of which bit deep into the earth as the old horse started forward under the urge of voice and flapping reins. Seeing that he was likely to be held there in the garden, Rad hastily unhitched the horse, leaped on its back, and then, with the traces flapping and jingling, rode to the scene of the blaze.

Koku, when he was not using his great strength to advantage at the works, employed himself about the Swift house and grounds. He happened to be watering the lawn just when the fire whistle blew.

"Ho! Me got just the t'ing for fire!" cried Koku. "Take squirty hose to 'um an' put 'um out!"

Off he started on a run, but was soon brought to a standstill when he reached the limits of the hose which was screwed fast to a faucet. But a little thing like this did not bother the giant.

"You no come I make you come!" he cried.

Exerting but a little of his terrible strength, Koku gave one yank on the hose. It parted. Then, with one end dangling in his big hands while the other end, from which the water was still spurting, was attached to the faucet, the giant ran to the fire with the useless bit of rubber.

It happened that Eradicate and Koku reached the pattern shop at the same time, the giant with his hose and the colored man on his horse.

"I put out fire!" yelled the giant. "See! I bring hose!"

And then for the first time he seemed to realize that in pulling the hose apart he had cut himself off from the supply of water. A queer, blank look came over his face.

"Hose he come with me—water no come!" murmured the giant.

"Golly! Ef dat ain't jest like de big booby!" chuckled Eradicate. "Dat's about all de sense he's got!"

It was Eradicate's triumph, for Koku was

completely flabbergasted by pulling the hose in twain and did not have a word to say.

However, this was only a side issue. Before Tom's two jealous servants had arrived some men in the pattern shop had already unreeled the fire hose there and a stream was playing on the blaze, while others came up, some with a portable chemical extinguisher on wheels—a powerful fire-fighting engine—and a little stream from this served to end all danger.

Tom directed the work of his men, and had the satisfaction of seeing the danger rapidly pass. The blaze was in a pile of wood and other refuse in the pattern shop, and little real damage was done.

"Well, we came out of that rather better than I expected," remarked Tom, as he stood with Ned and Mr. Newton surveying the still smoking interior of the pattern shop.

"I should say so!" agreed the manager, for well he knew that it needed but a small blaze to destroy many valuable patterns.

"What is it, Tom?" asked Mr. Swift, as he came up as fast as he could, having heard the alarm of fire.

"All over—nothing worth worrying about," Tom answered. "Fifty dollars will cover our loss, and we've got insurance on everything."

Mr. Swift looked in, to make sure just what

had happened, and asked a few questions, to one of which a man replied:

"Yes, the fire started near where that new fellow was working."

"You mean that Russian, Barsky?" asked Mr. Swift sharply.

"I think that's his name," the man replied. "We call him Whiskers in the shop."

"There, Tom, I told you not to hire that man!" said the young inventor's father in a low voice.

"But he had nothing to do with the fire, Dad," explained Tom. "He wasn't even near when it happened. I inquired about that. The thing happened because a plumber's blow torch which one of the men was using to burn off some stuff overturned when a pulley broke and fell on it. Nobody's fault at all. It was just one of those accidents you can never foresee. No one knew the pulley was split. The man using the blow torch had taken all precautions, but he couldn't count on a pulley falling on it from above. And Barsky wasn't even there."

"Um! Well, I don't like him just the same," said Mr. Swift.

"I guess it's all over," remarked Ned to his chum when it was seen that the last, smouldering spark was out.

"Yes," agreed Tom. "I must get back to my desk. I want to finish those computations by noon if I can, for I have to go to Mansburg this afternoon."

"I'd better check up on this fire," observed Ned. "There'll have to be a report made of it to the insurance company, small as the damage was, and we're entitled to a claim."

"I'll leave it to you," returned Tom. "You'd better splice that hose, Koku," he said, with a smile. "And look out for your horse, Rad. He might kick at some of the men. He's a cross old beast."

"He won't lessen I tells him to. An' they ain't but one pusson I'd like to hab him plant his hoofs on!" snorted the colored man.

"I think I can guess who that is," remarked Ned, with a chuckle.

The men from the other shops dispersed to their several places, the fire hose was reeled back into place, and Rad urged his horse back to the garden cultivator. Koku, still staring in puzzled fashion at the half length of broken hose in his hand, wandered back to his post, murmuring:

"Hose, he come along ob me—water, he no come. How can do?"

Clearly it was a problem too deep for his brain.

Tom hurriedly entered his private office, his mind intent on many things but chiefly concerned with a knotty problem in applying sufficient force to a train to stop it and at the same time, doing no damage to the passengers or to the tracks or the train.

"It's got to be done with a recoil system, either of springs or hydraulic pistons," said the young inventor.

As he entered the room Tom was surprised to see the form of Ivan Barsky, the new Russian pattern maker, making a hurried exit from it by the rear.

For a moment the young man was too surprised to quite take in the significance of the matter. As he slowly realized that strict orders had been posted to the effect that none of the men from the shop was to enter the private offices unbidden, Tom called:

"What were you doing in here?"

Sharp suspicion entered his mind.

Who was this foreigner and what was his game?

CHAPTER VIII

A SECRET LISTENER

TOM SWIFT, in a crisis, was not one to think first and act afterward. Usually he did his acting first, and this was one of those instances.

Like a flash of fire it ran through his mind that now was the best time to ascertain what object the foreigner could have in breaking the regulations and entering Tom's private office.

With the end in view of settling the matter then and there, Tom dashed across the room and out of the rear door by which Barsky had left. The young inventor had a glimpse of the Russian hastening along just ahead of him. He was making good time, too. But Tom Swift, too, was a sprinter. In spite of all the machines for locomotion that Tom had invented, he could still run.

He caught up to Ivan Barsky and seized that individual by the arm.

"Hey! Wait a minute!" cried Tom, not very dramatically, perhaps, but effectively.

"Eh? What eet iss?" The man seemed to

hiss the words in his peculiar way. There was a frightened look on his face and, also, one of innocence, real or assumed. "You weesh to see me, Mr. Swift?" asked Barsky.

"It might be the other way around," announced Tom grimly as he faced the man. "It rather looks as if you wanted to see me—going into my office when I wasn't there. Don't you know that's against the rules?"

"Pardon—I did not know eet."

"Well, it is! I'm telling you now! No one from the works allowed in the private office without permission. Now, why did you go there—especially when I was out fighting the fire, which was in your department?"

"Fire? Yes, I hear the wheestle, but I see that so soon the fire he is out so I cannot think that it to a great deal amounts. I hope none of my new patterns were burned." He seemed genuinely anxious on this score.

"Luckily the fire was only in some rubbish," explained Tom. "But that has nothing to do with the fact that you were in my office in my absence. What did you go there for?" and the voice of the young inventor was stern.

"Oh—I my presence must explanation? Yes, of courseness. I go there to get heem!"

He held up to Tom a complicated slide rule, often used in making intricate computations

that, otherwise, would entail much work at figures.

"I need these for that train stop pattern I am making for you, Mr. Swift," the man explained.

"Yes, I thought you would need that rule, and I intended sending it out to you," Tom said. "But you should not have gone to my office to take it while I was absent."

"Pardon! I did not know you were not at home. Also did I not know of the prohibition against entering the office when you were not in. I saw the rule—I need heem very much to make the pattern of finished appearance. So I take the rule and hurry back to my bench."

"You hurried all right—I'll say that," murmured Tom grimly.

"Yes—I am of a hurry kind. Most of us Russians are. Now that I have of explanation made, eet is permit that I take these?" and he again held up the rule.

"Oh, yes, I suppose so," conceded Tom slowly. He could not say anything else, it seemed. There was such an air of innocence about the man that to break it down, if it were pretended, required better evidence than Tom at this moment possessed.

Certainly Barsky had taken nothing more than the slide rule, and he needed it in his work.

Tom felt that the man should have had it before. for it was the most essential tool. How then, could he find fault with the foreigner for taking what, obviously, was within his right? Of course he had broken a rule, but this might be overlooked.

So Tom had to say it was all right and let the matter go at that.

"Only don't go into my office again without permission," concluded the young inventor.

"Naturally not—since you have told me," said Barsky. "I shall send word in advance of my veesit next time," and with a bow he took himself off.

"Hum," mused Tom as he strolled back to his own quarters. "Now was that sarcasm or not?"

He thought he was perhaps rather exaggerating the importance of the incident, and was somewhat put out by the construction Barsky might put on being thus reprimanded until Tom happened to look in the room where the chest of secrets was kept.

Not only was this room open, but so, also, was the chest itself and in plain view were a number of valuable plans and drawings.

"Hang it all!" exclaimed Tom. "I wonder if that chest was open while Barsky was in here after that rule? It must have been. Some one is getting careless; but as it may have been I

who opened that box and forgot to close it when the fire whistle blew, I'd better not say anything about it. Ned or Mr. Newton might think I was hitting at him. Yes, I've got to be more careful, with strange workmen about and valuable new plans under way."

Tom looked carefully over his chest of business secrets, and, as far as he could ascertain, nothing had been disturbed. He knew in a general way what was in the box.

"But I think the safest way to do," he told himself, "would be to have Ned make a list of all the documents in there. Then we can check them over from time to time. I'll do that."

So, without saying anything to his chum about the visit of Barsky, Tom told the young manager to list all the documents in the chest after attending to the fire insurance matter.

"We can't be too careful of these invention papers," remarked the author of many of them.

"You're dead right you can't," agreed Ned.

The fire was but a small incident in the day's work at the Swift plant. Fires in such a big shop were not at all uncommon; so matters were soon running smoothly again.

During the next two or three days Tom paid several visits to the pattern department, and each time he went there he found Barsky busily at work, using the slide rule with an expertness

that gave Tom a good opinion of the fellow's ability in his own line of work.

"I'm glad I hired him—that is, so far as getting what I wanted done," Tom said to his father. "He makes patterns better than any man we ever had."

"Yes, I have looked at some of the models he has turned out," Mr. Swift replied. "But I can't get over a certain uneasy feeling when I am near that man, Tom. It's a sort of fear, I believe."

"Nonsense!" laughed the young fellow. "You are imagining things, Dad. Barsky is no ten-thousand-dollar beauty, I grant you that, for he has enough hair and whiskers for a dozen sofa cushions. But we aren't running a beauty parlor, and he does do good work."

"Yes, Tom. Well, I'll leave it to you. It's more in your department than mine, anyhow. By the way, is there anything new in the case of Mr. Newton? We must do all we can to help him."

"We will, Dad. I don't know that there are any new developments. I'll ask Ned. But Plum has orders to look after that case to the best of his ability. Now I suppose you want to get back to your book, don't you?"

"If you don't mind, Son," answered Mr. Swift, with an anxious look toward his desk

which was littered with papers. The talk had taken place in the older inventor's private office.

"All right, I'll leave you with your pet," laughed Tom, for the new book was Mr. Swift's chief joy and pride. "But I'd like to have a talk with you this evening, Dad."

"By all means, Tom. I'll be free then. Come and chat. But just now I want to finish that chapter on hydraulics. I find it most fascinating, and I am using some of the data you evolved when you built the big submarine."

"Yes, I fancy we discovered a new principle or two there," answered Tom, with justifiable pride. "And you're welcome to quote me at any length you wish, Dad," he finished, with a laugh.

"All right!" chuckled the old inventor. "You're somewhat of an authority, Tom, on a few subjects."

Mr. Swift plunged into his literary work before Tom had reached the door on his way out, so eager was he to resume work on his book, and Tom was glad his father had something of this sort to interest him and give him an object in the declining years of his life.

"Tom, what say, we go to a ball game this afternoon?" suggested Ned when the young inventor returned to his office. "It's too nice a day to work."

Tom glanced out at the sunlight dancing over the green grass. He looked at his paper-laden desk and then at the clock.

"Ned," he suddenly exclaimed, "I'm with you! And if you weren't already drawing a bigger salary than you'll ever be worth, I'd give you an advance for the valuable suggestion. How about you, Mr. Newton? Will you come to the game?" he went on, thinking to take the man's mind from his trouble over the missing Liberty Bonds.

"Thank you, Tom, no. There are a few things I want to get straightened out on my books."

"Better let them go for a time," suggested Tom. "You'll do better work afterward. That's the way I feel about it. I'm in a sort of maze on this train-stop device. I'm up against a stone wall. So I'm going to a ball game and I order you two to come with me!"

"Oh, if it's an order from the boss—that's another matter," laughed Mr. Newton. So, Tom, having seen to it that his chest of secrets was securely locked, brought around the electric runabout and all three went to the ball game.

"Is there anything new in your case, Mr. Newton?" asked Tom, as they sat in the grandstand, watching the players warm up.

"No, Tom, not a thing. I am leaving everything to Mr. Plum, as you suggested. He hasn't reported anything new."

"Has that fellow, Fawn, or any of the firm pestered you about the missing bonds?"

"No. But Fawn sneers every time he sees me. I fancy he is much put out that I am not in jail."

"You needn't worry about that," laughed Ned, though in his heart he keenly felt the disgrace that had come to his father.

"Is this seat taken?" asked a young lady's voice behind Tom, and he turned to look into the smiling face of Mary Nestor.

"Of course not!" he exclaimed, rising, as did his two companions. "Always room for one more. I didn't expect to see you here, Mary," the young inventor added.

"And you didn't think of inviting me, I suppose," said Mary demurely. "I think I will sit by Ned."

"If you do I'll discharge him, and then he won't like you," said Tom, as he made room beside himself for the girl to whom he was engaged. "I'm awfully glad you're here. We came in such a hurry—on the inspiration of a spontaneous suggestion by Ned—that I never thought to 'phone over and see if you wanted to come."

"Oh, all right—I'll forgive you!" the girl laughed.

But there was a quick exchange of looks between Mary and Ned. In fact, Mary had suggested privately to Ned that he bring Tom to the game, as she intended to meet him there. Often it was necessary to use a ruse to get Tom away from his absorbing work of inventing things.

However, here he was, and soon he was enjoying the game with his friends. It was not much in the way of a ball contest, but it served to pass away the afternoon and change the current of all their thoughts.

That evening after supper, Tom and his father drew their chairs together in the living room for one of their old-time chats. Mr. Swift was in a pleasant mood, for he had done some work on his book that afternoon which gratified him very much and about which he was enthusiastic.

"Tom, how are things going?" he asked his son.

"Very nicely, indeed," was the answer. "Of course, I am not making as much progress as I'd like to on that train-stop device, but it will come. And when it does, I think it will be worth good money to us."

"Yes, that, and some of the other inventions

we have under way, will be worth sixty thousand dollars, I think, when they are completed."

"Well, that estimate may be a bit high," returned Tom slowly.

"No!" protested his father. "I put it low. I think they'll run over sixty thousand dollars. Why, that mill machinery idea of yours——"

"Hark!" exclaimed Tom softly, holding up a hand to caution silence.

"What is it?" asked his father.

"I heard some sort of a noise outside on the porch."

Tom arose to go toward one of the windows, the shades of which were drawn down. But before he reached the casement Eradicate came hurrying into the room, very much excited.

"What's the matter, Rad?" asked Tom quickly.

"Somebody on de piazzy listenin' at de window!" exclaimed the colored man. "I jest been to see dat de henhouse was locked up, an' I done seen somebody on piazzy! I runs up, but he runs away an' I didn't cotch him! But dey was somebody listenin'!"

CHAPTER IX

MARY'S MESSAGE

ONCE again Tom Swift had occasion to act quickly, as he had when he discovered Barsky in his private office. Without waiting to question Eradicate, the young inventor made a dash for the door. A moment later he was outside, looking for a sign or trace of the mysterious intruder.

But the night was dark, there was no moon; and Tom, coming from a lighted room, was at a greater disadvantage than otherwise would have been the case. It was not until several seconds had passed that the young man could make out objects in the gloom, and none of these objects was the unknown person he sought.

Still Tom was not going to give up so easily. He shouted to Koku, and when the giant joined him and when Eradicate had come shuffling out the three began a hurried search around the house for the secret listener.

"Well, I guess he got away," sighed Tom.

He was greatly disappointed when it was evident that no one was to be caught.

"He suah has," agreed Eradicate.

"What sort of man was it?" asked Tom. "I suppose it was a man, Rad, and not a woman?"

"Oh, yes, Massa Tom! It suah was a man aw right! An' he was a sorta big man, but stoopin' ober like, leanin' down an' tryin' to look under de window shade."

"Why didn't you jump on him, Rad?"

"Dat's jest what I was tryin' to sneak up an' do, Massa Tom. But I done sneezed jest when I got by de piazzy, an' he done hears me an' jumps away."

"By golly! I cotch him ef I been dar!" cried the giant. "I take 'um in my two hands—so. I squoze 'um—so!"

Truly there would have been but little chance for the trespasser had Koku got his hands on him.

"Ha! Ha!" chuckled Eradicate. "He go so fast, Giant, dat he make you look like a worm crawlin' along!"

The giant was not very fast in his movements, and he realized this. Still he did not like to be taunted about this failing, and he now made a reach for Eradicate, who, however, easily eluded his enemy.

"Come now! None of that!" ordered Tom

sharply. "I guess this fellow, whoever he was, might have been only a tramp. Take a stroll around for a while, Koku, and see if he comes back."

"Sure, Master, I watch."

"An' I'll be on the lookout, too," offered Eradicate.

"Look around, both of you, and don't scrap. Do you hear? Don't scrap between yourselves. I'm getting tired of it!"

"I be good to Rad, Master," promised the giant.

"Huh! You better, ef you all knows whut good fo' you!" chuckled the colored man.

Tom went back to his father, finding the old gentleman somewhat nervous and upset.

"What was it, Son?" he inquired.

"Oh, just some tramp, I think," replied the lad easily. But in his own mind he was disturbed by the incident.

"I wonder if that was Barsky or some of our old enemies?" mused Tom to himself, when he had gone to his own room after some further talk with his father concerning the various inventions and patents. "There's always a chance of some of the old gang trying some of their tricks.

"But what object could any one have in listening to the talk between dad and me? We

only mentioned generalities, and what we said would have been of no value to any one. Still, whoever was listening didn't know that. They may have hoped to pick up some information that could be used against us."

But though he was worried and a bit apprehensive, Tom did not dwell long on this phase of the matter. He knew it would do little, if any, good.

Still he was not so foolish as to omit all precautions, and a little later he went outside to see if Koku or Eradicate had seen any further signs of the intruder.

Both the giant and the colored man reported that they had seen no one, and Tom sent them to bed, after giving orders to see that the house was well locked for the night.

The shops, some distance away, were well guarded by watchmen, as well as by a system of electrical burglar alarms, a bell of which was set up in Tom's room. No one could get in or over the high fence which surrounded the works without disclosing his presence.

Tom was a little apprehensive that in the night the alarm bell might ring, telling him that some one was trying to sneak into the factory. However, the hours of darkness passed uneventfully and with the coming of morning Tom's fears passed away.

He went out to look around the porch on which the mysterious listener had crouched beneath the window, but there were no clues that he could follow.

"I'll just have to let things take their course," decided Tom. He reported the matter to Ned, as he generally did in such cases.

"I wouldn't worry about it," said Ned cheerfully.

"I'm not," declared Tom, but his manager could see that he was and that he could not get his mind down to work. At last Tom himself became aware of his nervous condition, and shortly after noon, throwing his pencil down on his desk, he exclaimed:

"I'm going out for a ride, Ned. Come along. It will clear the cobwebs out of our brains."

"Going in the runabout?" asked Ned.

"No, in the little biplane. She's just been tuned up and runs like a sewing machine. We'll take a spin up in the clouds."

Ned considered for a moment, looked at a mass of papers on his desk, and answered:

"No, thank you, I'd better not go. Besides, Mr. Plum just telephoned that he'd like to see me about dad's case, and I want to run over there."

"All right," agreed Tom. "Take all the time you want, Ned. But I don't want to go sky-

larking alone. I think I'll 'phone Mary. I haven't had her up in the biplane for some time."

"Yes, you and Mary go for a spin," replied Ned. "Only take care that it isn't a tail-spin."

"The *Hummer* doesn't indulge in such antics," replied Tom, with a laugh. "But first I'd better see if she'll tune up as she did the other day. I don't want to get Mary out in her and then have something go wrong. I'll just run her out, Ned, and give her a warming up. Then, if everything's all right, I'll call Mary. You can look after things here, I suppose?"

"Yes, either dad or I will. He'll be back soon, and then I'll take a run over to Plum's office."

Tom owned several planes, but of the two-winged variety the one he best liked was the *Hummer*, a small but speedy craft. This machine was kept in a hanger near the flying field, and it did not take the young inventor long to have her run out that he might test the engine.

"She sure sounds sweet, Mr. Swift," remarked the mechanic who assisted him.

"Yes, Dirk, she's throbbing like a wild duck. I guess I'll take her up for a time."

Going back to the office Tom reported to Ned that everything about the *Hummer* was in good shape and that he would probably be gone for

the remainder of the day. As there was no good landing place near the home of Mary Nestor it was necessary for her to come to Tom's flying field, and while he was getting ready he sent one of his men for the young lady in an automobile. But first Tom called her on the telephone.

"Oh, Tom!" exclaimed Mary, as soon as she found who was on the wire, "I was just going to call you up!"

"You were?"

"Yes, it's awfully important! I want to see you very much!"

"Well, you'll have that pleasure directly."

"Oh, Tom, don't joke about it! It is important."

"What's the trouble, Mary," the young inventor asked, seriously enough now.

"I'll tell you when I see you—soon!"

Tom told the girl of the proposed trip and Mary hung up the receiver while Tom wondered at the note of anxiety in his sweetheart's message.

CHAPTER X

A QUEER STORY

THE young inventor was out at the flying field in his air togs going over every detail of his machine when Mary Nestor arrived in the auto driven by a messenger Tom often employed.

"Hello!" called the girl, as she leaped out of the car. She, too, wore a leather flying suit, for Tom had told her to put it on.

"Hello," responded Tom. "All ready?"

"Yes. But I want to talk to you, and we can't do it very well with the engine going. It makes such a noise."

"This one doesn't make as much racket as some do, for I've got a muffler on her," Tom replied. "But still you can't exactly carry on a whispered conversation in the *Hummer*."

"This conversation is going to be—well rather private," returned Mary in a low voice, with a glance toward the man who had brought her over in the car.

"We might start off, land in some lonely field,

and talk there," Tom suggested. "I could throttle down the engine just enough to keep her turning over, and yet not running enough to make the plane even taxi."

"Why can't you do that here?" asked Mary. "I want to tell you what I have to say, Tom, at once, as you might want to act on it."

"Well, I can have him turn the propellers and get her started," answered the youth, with a glance at his helper. "Then, with the engine idling, you can tell me the story while he goes back in the auto."

"Do that," suggested the girl. "I want to get it off my mind."

Accordingly, while Tom vainly wondered what his sweetheart could have to say to him of such importance, he took his place in the forward cockpit, in charge of the control levers, while the man stationed himself at the propellers.

The *Hummer* was comparatively easy to start. After the engine had been turned over once or twice, with the accompanying coughs and sighs, it started with a thundering roar that made the ground throb. Tom let it run until it was well warmed up. Then, knowing it would keep going at low speed without moving the plane, he throttled the gas down, adjusted the spark, and signed for his helper to leave.

"Now, Mary, I'm ready to hear your story," he said as he walked with his friend a short distance away from the *Hummer*.

"It's a queer story," said the girl. "And as soon as I heard it I started to call you on the 'phone. I was just going to take down the receiver when you called me."

"When did you hear this—whatever it is?" asked Tom, who was becoming more and more mystified by Mary's evident concern.

"Just this morning," she answered. "I was over in Mansburg doing some early shopping with Kate Borden. Shopping always makes me terribly hungry, as it does Kate, so about noon we went into a small restaurant for lunch."

"And I suppose you had mislaid your money and couldn't pay, and you had to blush and ask the manager to trust you, and now you want to go there in the plane and settle your debts. Is that it?" asked Tom, with a laugh.

"No, and if you make any more fun of me I sha'n't tell you a thing! So there, Tom Swift!" and Mary pouted bewitchingly.

"Mercy! I'll be good!" he promised.

His sense of humor was rudely shaken a moment later as Mary went on:

"While Kate and I were eating our lunch three men were eating at the next table—eating and talking. We didn't purposely listen—that

is, not until after I heard one of them mention the Swift Construction Company. But then, as you can imagine, Tom, I was all ears. I shamelessly listened after that, and though I didn't hear all that was said I caught enough to know that they were talking about something like a tidal engine. Is there any such thing, Tom?"

"Is there, Mary? I should say there is! It's one of my latest and best inventions! I believe I can harness the ocean with it—at least, a part of the tide. But go on—what did they say about the tidal engine?"

"One of the men seemed angry that you hadn't sold it to them. He spoke of Mr. Damon and said it was too bad—or words to that effect—that Mr. Damon's negotiations had fallen through."

"Go on," urged Tom, as Mary hesitated a moment. "This is interesting, and it may be vitally important. Go on!"

"Then they spoke something about mill machinery," resumed the girl. "I couldn't get that very plainly—I don't know much about mechanics—but they spoke of a turbine grinder. Is that right?"

"That's right!" exclaimed Tom. "But it will be all wrong if they get on to any of my plans in that respect. I'm mighty glad you listened

to this talk, Mary! Who were the men—I mean what did they look like?”

“I’ll describe them to you as well as I can. I had never seen any of them before, as far as I know. The whole trend of the conversation was to the effect that they had tried unsuccessfully, through Mr. Damon, to get you or your father to sell them some or all of the rights in these inventions. Is that the case?”

“Yes. Mr. Damon came to me some time ago—the day he landed on the roof in his little plane—and wanted me to consider negotiations. But I sent word by him to these fellows, who were represented by Mr. Blythe, not to bother, for I wasn’t in the market.”

“I didn’t hear Mr. Blythe’s name mentioned,” said Mary, knitting her forehead into a series of wrinkles as she tried to recall all the details of the affair. “But there was some one whose name began with B—let me see—I wrote it down.”

She fumbled in her pocket and brought out a slip of paper on which she had written one word—Blodgett.

“That’s the man, Tom,” she said. “Mr. Blodgett. One of the three who were talking near our table remarked: ‘Never mind. I think Blodgett will fix it.’ Those were the words he used.”

"Hum," mused Tom. "Blodgett—and he will fix it. Fix what, I wonder?"

"That I can't say," answered Mary, for Tom had spoken aloud. "Right after one of the men said that, all three went out. I didn't know what to do. I kept wishing you had been there. But I made up my mind I'd tell you about it as soon as I could."

"Yes, Mary. Thanks! I'm glad you did. It's all a mystery to me."

"What do you think it means?"

"That would be hard to say. I'll have to admit I'm a bit worried about it, in view of several things that have happened at the shop lately."

"Oh, Tom do you think there is any danger?"

"No more than usual. There's always danger when you have rivals. But I never heard of this Blodgett that I know of. As for the other matters: As I said, Mr. Damon opened the subject but I told him to head off any visit of the men to me, for I wouldn't do business with them. And from the fact that they haven't called on me, I took it that they had dropped the matter."

"It doesn't seem so, though, does it?" asked Mary.

"I should say not! I don't like this at all!" Tom seemed anxious and upset over the matter.

"And what I particularly don't like is the way they said Blodgett would fix it. Is that the word they used?"

"Yes. It was 'fix,' I'm sure of it."

"Smacks of desperation," commented Tom. "I wonder if the owner of the restaurant would know those men, Mary?"

"He might."

"Then I'm going to drop in and have a talk with him. Give me the address. Oh, I don't mean I'm going to drop in off the *Hummer* and let you run the machine alone," he went on with a laugh, as he saw Mary's momentary gasp of surprise. "I'll go over and see him to-morrow. Just now we'll go for a ride. I need a little free breathing space in the upper air."

"Yes, it's a wonderful day for a ride, Tom. And there's no sign at all of rain."

"We need rain, too," said the young inventor. "The woods and fields are as dry as tinder. If a forest fire should start now it would do a lot of damage. But as long as it hasn't rained for some time, we'll hope it will hold off until we get back from our spin. Come on—let's go!"

CHAPTER XI

A DOUBLE PERIL

WITH a roar the motor accepted the additional gas Tom turned into the cylinders, and a moment later the little plane began to move over the smooth surface of the field. Gathering speed, the *Hummer* slowly rose as the young inventor depressed the horizontal rudder, and a moment later up rose the machine like some creature of life—up and up toward the clouds.

"This is glorious!" cried Mary, thrilled by the sensation. Riding in a plane was not new to her, but she never failed to get a sense of exhilaration out of even a short spin in the air.

"Not so bad," answered Tom.

By raising their voices slightly they could make themselves audible to one another, for, as the young man had said, there was a silencer, or muffler, on his engine.

"It makes one forget all their trouble," called out Mary, as she looked over the side of the rear cockpit where she sat strapped in and

glanced down at the earth rapidly dropping away below them.

"Yes, it does," assented Tom. "That's one reason I wanted to come out to-day—to get rid of some of the cobwebs."

"And are they being brushed away?" asked Mary.

"Almost all gone!" he laughed, as he sent the *Hummer* up at a little steeper angle to gain a higher altitude more quickly.

The two young people gave themselves up to the thrill and revivifying influence of clear, pure, sunlit air. Deeply they breathed in of the life-giving particles, and the cheeks of Tom and Mary were ruddy with renewed health.

With no special object in view, they spun on through the air, now going up until they were above some low-lying clouds and again dipping down to view with pleasure the contour of some wonderful, green valley.

"Getting tired, Mary?" called Tom, after a while.

"No!" she called back to him. "I could go on like this forever."

"Guess I'll have to invent some new kind of machine if you want to do anything like that," the youth countered.

"What do you mean?" challenged Mary.

"I mean perpetual motion hasn't yet been

solved, and I don't believe it ever will be. As long as we have gasoline engines they will have to be given a drink now and then. Which reminds me that I haven't enough in the tanks of the *Hummer* to go on for more than a few hours more."

"I don't want to ride quite that long, of course! Don't take any chances. Go back now if you think anything is going to happen."

"Nothing is likely to happen!" chuckled the young inventor. "But I didn't want you to go on dreaming that dream of yours about keeping on forever."

"As if I meant that!" laughed the girl. "Better turn back now."

"In a little while," promised Tom, whose eyes were just then fixed on some object or some view just ahead. Mary was quick to notice his preoccupation as he spoke to her and at once asked:

"Is anything the matter, Tom?"

"Matter? No! Why do you ask?"

"Because you weren't thinking of what you were saying, that's all. I can always tell. Do you see anything?"

"To be perfectly frank, Mary, I do. I see a cloud of smoke over there in the direction of Shopton, and when I see smoke I think of fire. As we recently had a little blaze at one of the

shops, I am a bit anxious to see if this is another. Of course it will be as well fought with me away as with me there. But still——”

“Oh, Tom, I see it, too!” cried the girl, as a little puff of smoke made itself visible near a wooded part of the country. “Perhaps you’d better head back that way.”

“I think I will,” decided the pilot.

He moved the steering wheel slightly, banked the plane a bit, and was off in another direction, heading directly for the haze of smoke which by this time had considerably increased in volume.

At the time when Tom first saw the smoke menace he was several miles from it, though the clear air made the fire seem nearer than it was. But the *Hummer* was a speedy craft, and she quickly covered the distance.

As Tom Swift and Mary Nestor approached the blaze—for blaze it was, since they could now notice a redness that betokened flames—they could see it more plainly, and a sense of relief came to the young man when he noted that it was in a spot remote from his shops.

“Guess it’s a forest fire, Mary,” Tom observed. “I thought one would break out soon, it’s been so dry.”

“I’ve never seen a forest fire,” she responded. “It must be very thrilling.”

“It is—and dangerous,” replied Tom. “Well,

you're going to see one now, for we're going right over it."

"Do you think it will be safe, Tom?"

"Why not? We're so high you won't even smell the smoke. And as for the heat—well, they do get pretty warm, but you won't feel that."

"Oh, I didn't mean that so much," Mary hastened to say. "But if anything should happen to the plane——"

"Nothing is going to happen!" laughed Tom. "I'm going to give you a real view of a forest fire."

The smoke was rolling up in great clouds now. But of course the *Hummer* was far above the conflagration. Nor could they hear the crackling of flames, though this sound was audible to those fighting the fire.

Men and boys were at work combating the forest fire. Tom and Mary, from their vantage point high in the air, could note figures, like ants or flies, hastening from the surrounding country toward the scene of the blaze. Some were hastening up in autos, and others in horse-drawn vehicles.

"What do they do when they fight forest fires?" asked Mary. "I don't see any engines."

"Engines aren't of much use—the fire is very seldom near a water supply," answered Tom.

"The only thing to do is to take away the stuff a fire feeds on—dry leaves, sticks, wood or anything else. Sometimes they do this by digging up the ground or plowing it in broad, bare strips.

"Another way is to make a back fire. That is, they start some distance off from the blaze and set fire to a limited area. When this burns off, and of course it has to be kept under control, it leaves a black space with no fuel for the fire to feed upon, and when the original fire gets to the place it just naturally quits. They use wet bags, pieces of carpet, anything to beat out the line of flames when they actually fight the fire."

"It must be hard work," decided Mary.

"It is—hot, hard, dirty work. Well, we've got a pretty good view of this fire now, and I must say I don't like the looks of it," remarked Tom.

They were fairly over the burning area now. Below them were the snapping, leaping flames and the billowing clouds of smoke. More men and boys were hastening up to do what they could to combat the conflagration.

"If there should only come a rain now it would settle the fate of this fire," remarked the young inventor.

Tom looked up and across the sky. It was blue in nearly every quarter—too blue and

beautiful to suit those who wanted water to pour down from the heavens.

"There's a little haze in the west," remarked the lad, at length. "It might indicate the coming of a thunderstorm. That's what is needed—a sudden, drenching thunderstorm. A gentle shower would help, but a regular cloudburst is needed. Of course, a sizzling rain would put the fire out in time, but it would take too long."

"Oh, I do hope it rains!" exclaimed Mary.

Tom guided the *Hummer* over the very center of the fire, which seemed to be burning in an area of forest and brush country several miles square in extent. Of course in the very center of the blaze no attempt was being made to fight it; that would have been too dangerous. It was on the edges of the ever-increasing circle that the men and boys were making the attack.

Dropping down a bit, so Mary could see better, Tom pointed out where scores of the firefighters were trying to beat the flames to earth with long-handled wet bundles of rags, which from time to time they dipped in brooks and ponds.

"It looks like a losing fight," sighed the girl. "Oh, Tom, suppose the fire reaches Shopton!"

"It won't with the wind the way it holds now," was the reply. "But of course we'd all feel better with the fire out."

He swung the machine around to take in another angle of the fire.

"Isn't there anything you can do, Tom?" asked Mary. "This is terrible!"

Tom was himself wondering if he could not be of service instead of merely looking on from his vantage point of safety in the air. He had invented an aerial fire-fighting machine, but this, with its chemical bombs, had been disposed of, and there was none on hand at Shop-ton.

"I might drop some army bombs down and try to blow up a big, bare area which would bring the fire to a stop," said Tom. "But it would take some time to get ready for that, and they may have it out in a few hours. No, I'm afraid I can't do anything just now. But we had better——"

Tom was about to say he had better start back with Mary when, with a suddenness that was startling, the motor of his plane went dead and the machine began to drop toward the heart of the forest fire.

"Oh, Tom!" cried Mary. "Don't go down so close! It's dangerous!"

CHAPTER XII

A RING OF FIRE

KNOWING little of the actual working of aeroplanes, Mary did not realize what the stopping of the engine meant. She thought Tom had simply shut it off, as he often did, so the noise would not interfere with their hearing of what was going on below.

"Go on back up, Tom!" cried the girl. "I don't want to go so close."

"I'm afraid there's no help for it," stated Tom grimly.

"What—what do you mean?"

"I mean the motor's stopped. Something has gone wrong with it. We're making a forced landing. Goodness knows what the outcome will be!" But Tom said the last to himself as he saw the forest fire seemingly rushing nearer and nearer.

It looked as if he would crash down in the midst of the burning trees.

"If there was only an open place to land it

wouldn't be so bad!" desperately thought Tom. "I might be able to make it. But to crash down into a lot of trees and bushes, and with those trees and bushes on fire."

Still he kept up a brave front for Mary's sake. It was more on her account that Tom was worrying than on his own. He felt that he could take a chance and jump at the last minute, though he carried no parachutes on this plane. But for Mary to leap was out of the question.

"Oh, Tom!" she cried, "what is going to happen?"

For a moment the young inventor did not reply. Then a desperate idea came into his mind. It was a big chance, but the only one, and it must be taken.

Not far away was Lake Carlopa, a large sheet of water on which Tom had tried out many of his marine ideas. If he could reach that he might yet save himself and Mary, and, perchance, even the plane. For though the *Hummer* was not equipped with pontoons for alighting on water, yet the plunge into that element would be less damaging to her than a crash to the ground.

"And there'll be chance for us, too," thought Tom. "She'll keep afloat on her wings for a few seconds if she doesn't go into a nose dive. Yes, I'll head for the lake."

Desperately he tried to picture to himself the grounds surrounding the lake. He was trying to decide whether there was a field big enough in which to bring the *Hummer* to a regular gliding landing. If there was, nothing more would happen than always happened when an aeroplane landing is made.

But, as Tom recalled it, there were only scattered farms about the lake, and none of these was suitable for a landing field. Adjacent to the lake were picnic grounds, but these were covered with scattered trees and buildings.

"The open lake is my only chance," decided Tom. "But can I reach it? That's the question."

He could see, shimmering in the sunlight ahead of him, Lake Carlopa. But he also became aware that his machine was steadily going down. He tried to figure out whether he could gain enough horizontal distance in proportion to his vertical drop to make the lake. And as he looked at the distance separating him from the body of water, it was with a sinking sensation in his heart that he answered himself in the negative.

"It can't be done!" Tom told himself.

This being the case, he must pick out the next best expedient.

"We've got to crash, and soon," he reasoned:

"I'd better pick out a big, soft tree. The upper branches will give a little and bring us up gradually. A tree's better than the ground with its underbrush."

After her first spasm of terror Mary had become calm, and was sitting tensely in her seat waiting for Tom to bring her out of the danger.

It was not the first time she and the young inventor had been in desperate plights, and always before this Tom had come out ahead of the game in taking chances with death. Of course there could be one last time, but Mary was not thinking of that.

"It looked as desperate as this on Earthquake Island," she told herself. "Yet we got off, thanks to Tom."

All this while the *Hummer* had been gliding down on a long slant. Mary realized, of course, that the longer and more gradual the slant, or angle, at which the falling aeroplane approached the earth, the better chance it had for making a gentle and safe landing. It is the sudden nose dives, or tail spins, straight to earth that crash the planes and kill the pilots.

Tom was saving his machine. He would let it glide swiftly down for a short distance and then head it up, so it would nose toward the sky. This would slacken its speed and also carry it further along.

But it was evident that he could never cross the wide area of the burning forest and reach Lake Carlopa. That was out of the question. The next best thing, as Tom had decided, was to land in some big tree, the springing branches of which would act as a cushion.

"But I've got to pick out a spot where there isn't any fire," Tom told himself.

There was, of course, a certain burning area of the forest fire. Equally of course, there was not an even number of square miles ablaze. The fire was irregular in shape, and there were portions, perhaps a mile in extent each way, where the flames had not taken hold. Also, because of the nature of the fuel on which it fed, the fire advanced irregularly. The line of its advance was one that curved in and out, so that there were indentations here and there like the shore line of the sea, with bays of fire and points of woodland as yet unburned.

To pick out one of these places was Tom's desire, and as the aeroplane glided nearer and nearer to the earth he knew that he must soon make this decision.

"Oh, Tom, what are we going to do?" faltered Mary. The suspense was telling on her. She could not quite fathom Tom's object.

"We're going to land in that big pine tree," he suddenly exclaimed. "Hold your arms over

your face, Mary, so you won't be scratched. Look out now—here we go!"

As Tom spoke he ducked down behind the protection cowl of the cockpit in front of him, having a moment before adjusted the steering lever so as to glide into the top of an immense pine tree which stood in the midst of a clump of other giants of the forest, in a space as yet untouched by fire.

A moment later the *Hummer* crashed—crashed with a thud, a rending, a crackling, a splintering and tearing that went to Tom's heart, for the plane was almost like a live creature to him.

Even as the plane crashed, Tom knew that he had made the best landing possible, and that, for the time at least, he and Mary were safe.

As Tom had anticipated, the spreading branches of the great pine tree acted as an immense cushion, and as the *Hummer* was a comparatively small plane, she was buoyed up. That is, at least long enough to take up the first shock.

In a few seconds Tom realized that he and Mary must make a hasty exit from the plane, for it might slip from its position, and portions of it drop on them as they slid from their seats.

The poor *Hummer* was badly broken. A plane cannot crash down into a tree and not have

something like that happen. They are not built for that sort of thing. Tom realized this.

"Quick, Mary!" he called. "Unstrap yourself and I'll help you climb out and down. I don't know how long this plane will stay here."

Mary had recovered her nerve after the first shock of the crash and as soon as she realized that neither of them was hurt beyond more than bruises and a shaking up.

"I can get out myself," she announced, as she loosed the strap that held her to the cockpit seat. "And I can climb down out of the tree, Tom. I'm glad I wore leather knickerbockers to-day."

"So am I," murmured the young inventor.

He had loosed himself in his seat and turned now to help Mary, but of this there was little need, since she was capable of acting for herself.

Several of the branches of the great pine had been broken off, and the jagged ends were sticking through the frail wings and the almost as frail fuselage of the plane. These branches thus held it in place for a time, but it might slip down at any moment.

"How are you making it, Mary?" asked Tom, as he climbed out on a branch.

"I'm all right," she said. "This is fun—just climbing down out of a tree," and her laugh showed that her nerves were in good shape, for

which Tom was glad. But then, Mary Nestor never was the sort of girl to go off in a faint. She was a brave girl, and that was why Tom liked her so much.

Together the two made their way down out of the pine tree, leaving the plane impaled on the branches over their heads.

"Poor *Hummer!*" murmured Tom, with more feeling than he cared to show.

"Yes, and poor us, too, perhaps, Tom!" exclaimed Mary.

"Why, we're all right!" he exclaimed, as they reached the ground. "Hardly scratched."

"Yes; but look! The fire! It's all around us!"

Then Tom realized the peril he had all but forgotten—the peril of flames. As Mary spoke, the fire, with a sudden burst, leaped a gap hitherto open and the young people were in the midst of a raging conflagration—blazing trees and bushes all about them!

CHAPTER XIII

JUST IN TIME

MARY NESTOR had borne up bravely during the previous trying experiences. But the discovery that the fire was all about them unnerved her and filled her with horror.

"Oh, Tom!" she cried wildly. "We're doomed! If we only could have stayed up in the air!"

"That couldn't be done," Tom said grimly. "We were lucky enough to get down as we did without being hurt."

"Yes, I know. But now, Tom, look!"

Shuddering, Mary pointed to the encircling and advancing flames. As yet no clouds of smoke had blown their way, but it was only a question of time when the choking, acrid fumes would almost smother them—blind them.

"There must be some way out!" muttered the young inventor.

Desperately he scanned the ever-narrowing circle of fire about him and Mary. What could be done?

Dry as the woods were for lack of rain, yet

the trees and bushes were green, and burned in a certain, slow way which alone might prove the salvation of the two. Had this been fall, with a mantle of dried leaves on the ground, the fire would have flashed through as though igniting gunpowder. As it was, the closing in of the ring of fire was gradual. This, at least, gave Tom a chance to search his mind for some way out.

He gave a last despairing look up into the tree where hung the wreck of the *Hummer*. Truly, if the crash had not destroyed the little machine beyond hope of repair, the flames would soon finish her. But Tom was not a youth to sigh long where it did no good. His chief concern must now be to save Mary and himself.

"We've got to get out of this!" he cried. "It will soon be too hot for us."

"But can we get out?" Mary's lips were white, but she now had control of herself.

"I think so," Tom replied. "While it looks as though there was a solid ring of fire about us, there must be breaks in it here and there—places where there is comparatively bare ground, big rocks and so on, that will make a passageway for us. We must try to find one of these places, Mary. Now follow, but keep right behind me."

Tom said this because he wanted to be pre-

pared to save Mary should a sheet of flame suddenly spout up in front of them.

"Wait a minute!" cried the girl, as Tom would have made a dash toward a place where the smoke and fire seemed less dense and fierce.

"What's the matter?"

"Can't we use these? Wrap them about our hands and faces in case we get too near the fire?" asked Mary.

She pointed to two closely woven woolen blankets that had fallen out of the forward cockpit of the *Hummer*. Tom had stowed these away to be used on occasional trips when he went up to such an altitude that it was very cold, and a blanket about his legs and those of his passenger might add immeasurably to their comfort. With the tilting of the plane the blankets had fallen out shortly after Tom and Mary had climbed down from the tree.

"I've often read of persons wrapping their head in wet blankets to pass through flames," said the girl. "And these two are wet, Tom, look, sopping wet."

"Be careful they aren't soaking in gasoline!" warned the young man, as Mary picked up the coverings. "I guess that's what happened—the gas tank sprang a leak."

Mary's answer was to raise one edge of a blanket to her nose.

"It's water!" she cried. "Not gasoline at all."

"Good!" exclaimed Tom. "The radiator burst, of course, and soaked them. Good enough, Mary. They will be just the thing to protect our heads and faces. It's mighty dangerous to breathe smoke-laden air. Now we'll have a better chance!"

He saw to it that Mary had the wetter blanket of the two, then, with the coverings held in readiness to use should they approach too near any flame, the two in such a desperate plight started in that direction where the flames and smoke seemed least thick and menacing.

All about the girl and the youth the fire was raging. There was no difficulty now in hearing the crackling of the flames or the crash as some big tree, burned through, fell in the path of the raging element. Tom listened, thinking he might hear the shouts of the fire-fighters, and it was his hope that they might come to the rescue.

Though there might have been men and boys near the two imperiled ones, their presence could not make itself known above the roar and crackle of the flames.

For a time it seemed as if Tom and Mary might win through to safety by keeping on in the direction they first took. They went on for

some distance, now and then stopping to let what wind there was blow aside a curtain of choking, blinding smoke.

So far had they progressed that Tom was on the point of calling: "I think we're going to make it, Mary!" when, almost as he spoke, a curtain of smoke was swept aside and they saw a line of flame directly in their path over which it was impossible to leap and through which it was certain death to pass. Hitherto they had jumped several little, low lines of fire, which were low because they had little on which to feed.

But this ahead was part of the main blaze, and it needed only one glance at it to tell Tom and his companion that further progress was blocked in that direction.

"No go!" gasped Tom, shutting his eyes a moment to ease the smart and burn caused by the smoke.

"I should say not!" agreed Mary. "Suppose you go down that way and try a little to the left. It doesn't seem quite so smoky there."

Tom looked, and was of the same opinion.

"Better put the blanket over your head," he told the girl. "It seems to be getting hotter and more sparks are falling. They might catch in your hair."

The thickly woven blankets, wet as they were

with water from the broken engine radiator, would prove a good protection against sparks.

Accordingly, Mary threw hers over her head and Tom did likewise. Then he dashed in the direction the girl had indicated. But they did not get as far along this trail as they had on the other before they were stopped by a wall of fire.

"Oh, dear!" sighed Mary. "What are we going to do?" She felt helpless and almost hysterical, but for Tom's sake, resolutely held herself in control.

"Got to try some other direction!" gasped Tom, opening the blanket around his face a little so he could breathe more freely. "We've got to get out!"

Apparently, the only other course was to retreat and try the right, thought Tom, since the left had proved impracticable. And it was this decision—the only one possible under the circumstances—which eventually saved them.

No sooner had Tom taken the lead and gone a few steps down what seemed a fairly well defined path than he gave a shout of exultation.

"What is it?" cried Mary. "Do you see a way out? I don't. The smoke seems thicker than ever!"

"It is," Tom said. "But we'll soon be all right. I know where I am now. I know it by

that big rock. A little way down this path is a cave. It's near a brook, and though the brook may be dried up, the cave will make a place in which we can be safe from the fire. It's always damp in that cave. Besides, there's nothing in it to burn. Come on, Mary!"

"Are you sure you're right, Tom? It looks worse than ever in that direction!"

"Yes, I know where I am now," he replied. "We'll soon be all right!"

Though Tom spoke positively, Mary had her doubts, especially as it got hotter and smokier as they went down the path and the crackle of the flames was louder.

But once Tom Swift had been in a certain place, he never forgot it. He had an excellent sense of direction, and his memory had not played him false on this occasion.

Running along the edge of a tract of brambles and briars that were beginning to burn fiercely and looking back to see that Mary was following, Tom led the way down a little gulch. He seemed to be going right into the heart of the flames, and had Mary not known him as well as she did she might have feared to follow.

But she kept on, and a little later Tom came to a stop at the edge of a black, yawning hole in the side of a hill.

"Here's the place!" he cried. "And there's

the brook! Some water in it, too, which is the best luck yet. We'll have time to wet the blankets and get a drink! My mouth is parched!"

Mary, too, suffered from thirst, but she had made up her mind not to say anything about it for the present. Now, however, that there was a chance to get a drink, the thirst seemed to rush upon her irresistibly.

The fire had not yet reached the little gully, but the trees and bushes on the top of the ridge beneath which extended the cave were starting to burn.

"We'll have a few seconds," Tom remarked. "Come on down to the brook."

In spring, following the rains and the melting of snow, the brook was of goodly size. Now it was much smaller, though Tom knew it widened and deepened about half a mile farther down.

The two laved their hands and faces in the cooling water, drank copiously of it, and then soaked their blankets well. Then, as a fiercer crackling of flames than any yet warned them that the fire was advancing, Tom cried:

"Come on!"

Up from the edge of the brook they ran and into the cool, dark and friendly shelter of the cave. They reached it only just in time, for they were no sooner inside than a shower of sparks and burning brands, falling into some

dry sticks, leaves and grass near the mouth of the cavern, sent a sheet of flame directly across it.

“Now let the fire burn itself out—and it won’t take long at this rate!” cried Tom, as he and Mary stood in comparative safety, free from the menace of fire and out of that blinding, choking smoke.

Then, to Tom’s surprise, Mary burst out crying.

CHAPTER XIV

A QUEER ATTACK

THE young inventor, not much accustomed to tears, thought at first that Mary had been hurt in some way, perhaps burned by a flying brand.

"What is it? Tell me," he urged, taking her in his arms as they stood in the cool darkness and safety of the cave.

"I'm—I'm all right!" gasped Mary, looking up at him as well as she could in the gloom.

"All right? Then, why are you crying?"

"Oh, it's because—because I'm so glad we're—we're here—safe!" sobbed the girl.

"Oh!" exclaimed Tom, but there was a great deal of meaning in that one word. "Yes, I guess we're all right," he agreed.

He looked out of the cave. In front of it and on either side the fire was burning fiercely. Another few seconds and neither he nor Mary would have been able to get through that fierce, hot barrier. But the flames could not eat their way into the cavern.

Then, as he and the girl stood there, thankfulness in their hearts that they had thus come safely through two grave dangers, there suddenly sounded a deep, booming, vibrating sound that seemed to shake the earth about them.

"Dynamite!" cried Tom. "They've brought up explosives and are blowing up patches to stop the flames. A good idea!"

"No, that isn't dynamite," said Mary. "Don't you know thunder when you hear it?"

"Thunder?" cried Tom Swift.

"Yes. It's thundering! Don't you remember, we saw signs of a storm coming up in the west just before the aeroplane went dead?"

"That's right. If it is thunder——"

A booming crash interrupted him. There was no doubt of it, a heavy storm was pending.

"The rain will put out the forest fire," concluded Tom. "Then we can get out of here and back home."

"Home seems a long way off," sighed Mary.

"We can make it pretty quickly by going down the brook," suggested Tom. "The brook always rises a short time after even a little rain, for all the water in this section drains into it. I know where there's a boat hidden in the bushes not far from here, and we can paddle down in that."

"It sounds enticing," returned Mary. "Oh, I

look a fright, don't I?" she asked, with a nervous giggle. Having been in the cave a little while, their eyes were more accustomed to the gloom and they could see better.

"You do not!" emphatically cried Tom, which, of course, was the right answer.

"It has been a wonderful experience," she went on slowly. "Not that I would care to repeat it— Oh, Tom!"

She suddenly gave a gasp of fear and covered her eyes with her hands as a blinding flash of lightning seemed actually to shoot through the cavern. It was followed a second later by a crash of thunder which made even Tom Swift, used as he was to experimenting with big guns, jump.

"Here comes the rain!" he cried.

At that moment the storm broke with almost tropical fury, the big drops pelting down like hail on the burning trees, bushes and such dry leaves as had accumulated from the previous fall.

"This will douse the blaze," went on the young inventor.

Certainly, no forest fire could continue in the face of such odds as a violent rain storm—and this storm was violent. Seldom had Tom seen it rain so hard. He and Mary stood in the entrance to the cave and watched the drops pelt

down. They could observe the fire in front of them die away, the blaze flickering out and then the smoke ceasing.

"I guess those fire-fighters are glad of this!" observed Tom, as he remembered the hard-working men and boys.

"Indeed, yes," agreed Mary.

For an hour or more the downpour continued, and every vestige of the forest fire was extinguished when at last the muttering of the thunder died away and the fierce glow of the lightning faded from the blackened clouds.

Tom stepped outside the cave and looked about him. In the distance he could hear the loud murmuring of the brook, now turned into a good-sized stream.

"Come on, Mary," he called. "It's all over. We might as well start. Your mother may be worried about you. I'll find that boat and we'll soon be in Shopton."

"Oh, I do wish I had a comb or something!" exclaimed the girl as she emerged from the cavern, trying to pin her hair back to keep it out of her eyes.

"You look fine!" declared Tom, and he really meant it.

"I can't help it, anyhow," Mary said, smiling slightly. "Thanks, Tom."

The boat was found where Tom knew it to be

hidden—he had used it on some of his excursions with Ned—and soon he and his companion were riding in comparative comfort down the swift little stream. They passed through a region where the forest fire had eaten its devastating way, but now the danger was over, the rain having soaked and drenched the woods.

In due time Tom and his companion reached the outskirts of Shopton, and then, knowing Mary would like a little privacy, he went to the nearest telephone and called a taxicab from the town garage. It came out to get him and Mary, and a little later she was safe at home.

"Oh, Mary! I've been so worried about you!" cried Mrs. Nestor. "Where have you been?"

"Oh, aeroplaning, falling, climbing out of trees, forest-firing, thunder and lightning, boating and floating—those are just a few of our activities this afternoon," replied Mary, with a little excited laugh.

"What does she mean, Tom?" asked the bewildered lady.

"Those are some of the things that happened to us," the young inventor said. "It isn't a bit exaggerated. I suppose you heard about the forest fire?"

"Yes; and we were much worried for those in its path. But Mr. Nestor said it wouldn't come this way."

"No, it was far enough off from you," agreed Tom. "And it's all over now. Well, I think I'll get back. I took this afternoon off as a sort of rest and mental relaxation—and I got it!" he chuckled grimly.

"How is Mr. Newton's case coming on, Tom?" asked Mrs. Nestor.

"We thought very well, but something curious turned up a few days ago," answered the young inventor, but not going into details. "Mr. Plum and Mr. Newton are out of town now, running down some evidence."

At that moment the telephone rang, and Mr. Nestor, answering it, exclaimed:

"Tom Swift? Yes, he's here. Wait a minute and I'll let you talk to him. It's for you, Tom," he said, as he handed him the receiver.

"Hello!" called Tom into the instrument. Then he recognized his father's voice and was aware at once that something had happened. "What's that?" he cried. "An attack on you and Mrs. Baggert? Are you hurt? I'll be right over! Send Ned with the runabout! Yes, I'll come right away!"

There was an anxious look on his face as he hung up the receiver and turned to his friends.

"What is it?" asked Mary. "Has anything happened?"

"Lots, apparently," answered Tom, with a

grim smile. "Just a little while ago, while my father was alone, working in our office, he was mysteriously attacked and momentarily knocked senseless. Mrs. Baggert, too, was knocked down; and when Eradicate came to help he was savagely set upon—not that it would take much to knock out the poor old fellow."

"Who did it?" cried Mr. Nestor.

"Is your father much hurt?" asked Mary.

"Dad doesn't know who did it," Tom answered. "He isn't much hurt, I'm glad to say, or he wouldn't have been able to telephone. I didn't get a chance to ask him how Mrs. Baggert and Rad were, but I don't believe they're in a serious condition or he would have told me. It's the mysteriousness of the attack and what it may mean that alarms my father and, naturally, me also."

"Do you want me to go back with you, Tom?" asked Mr. Nestor. "I may be able to help you."

"Thank you, but I guess the worst is over. I'll telephone back and let you know how matters stand as soon as I find out myself. Ned ought to be here in a little while if he has luck."

"You mean if he isn't smashed up hurrying here," said Mary.

"Something like that—yes," Tom answered.

Certainly, Ned got out of the electric runabout about all it was capable of, for soon after Mr. Swift had telephoned the news of the mysterious attack the honk of the machine was heard out front. Bidding his friends good-bye, the young inventor was rushed to the scene of the latest outrage on the part of his enemies.

That it was the work of some enemy, or enemies, Tom did not for an instant doubt. It was not the first time those jealous of his success had tried to wrest from him by unfair means the fruits of his talents and toils.

"What's it all about, Ned?" he asked his manager, as he was rushed along in the electric car.

"Don't know, Tom," was the answer. "I had gone over to the bank, and I was delayed a little while. As a matter of fact, I stopped to hear some reports about the forest fire, for I was anxious about you.

"When I got back I found the office in confusion, and Eradicate, staggering about with a badly cut head, was telling some story about a big red-haired man who had burst in on your father and had tried to take some papers away from him. Mrs. Baggert, it seems, had come over to the office to bring your father a glass of milk which she thought he ought to have, and she tried to stop the attack. But the rascal went for her, too.

"As soon as I got in your father, having in the meanwhile located you at Mary's house, sent me over to get you. That's all I know about it."

"Is dad all right?"

"Yes—nothing serious. Though he's greatly upset, and that isn't any too good for him. But he got only a slight blow on the head."

"And a man with red hair did it," mused Tom. "Red hair! I don't know anybody with red hair who would be as desperate as all that. This is getting mysterious!"

CHAPTER XV

THE TRAP

THE young inventor, followed by his manager and chum, hurried into the house.

Tom found Dr. Clayton putting the finishing touches to the dressing on a scalp wound Eradicate had sustained in the encounter. In one corner of the room Mrs. Baggert, a bandage around one hand, was endeavoring to get Mr. Swift to drink something from a cup.

"I tell you I'm all right," insisted the old inventor. "I don't need any catnip tea, my dear Mrs. Baggert!"

"But it will be good for your nerves. Won't it, doctor?" asked the solicitous housekeeper.

"I guess it won't do him any harm," was the noncommittal answer. "There, Rad, now you'll be all right," he added. "You aren't as badly hurt as you thought."

"Say, this looks like a first-line dressing station!" exclaimed Tom, for a glance showed him that the situation was not as desperate as it had at first seemed. No one was seriously hurt.

"Three casualties, but they can all get back on the firing line soon," announced Dr. Clayton, with a smile.

"Are you able to talk to me about it, Dad?" asked Tom.

"He should be in bed and taking hot catnip tea!" insisted Mrs. Baggert.

"You ought to be in bed yourself, Mrs. Baggert!" returned Mr. Swift in kindly tones. "That wound in your hand——"

"Pshaw! A mere scratch. I've done worse to myself lots of times with a darning needle!" she replied. "And I do wish you'd take this catnip tea!"

"I'm not a baby!" laughed Mr. Swift. "But, give it here!"

He had decided that this was the best way of getting rid of the insistent and troubled house-keeper. He drank the concoction, making rather a wry face over it, and then Mrs. Baggert, satisfied, went out of the room.

"Now let's have the story," suggested Tom. "Start at the beginning. Is Rad able to tell his part in it?" he inquired, as he placed a chair for the aged colored man.

"I shore is!" was the emphatic answer. "An' ef dat red-haired rascal comes in yeah now I'll lambaste him a good one—dat's whut I will!"

"Better go easy, Rad," advised the doctor, who was putting away the materials he had been using.

"It was this way, Tom—" said his father, and then, noticing the rather disheveled condition of his son, he exclaimed: "Were you attacked also?"

"No. I had a little trouble with the plane and had to sprint with a forest fire," was the easy answer. "I'm all right. Go on."

Thereupon Mr. Swift related that he had been at work in a room opening out of Tom's main office on some figures Tom had asked him to verify when a man suddenly entered and without warning reached over the desk as if to grab the papers on which Mr. Swift was working.

"I gave a yell and leaped at him," said the aged inventor, "but he struck me with something in his hand. I got dizzy and sank back in my chair. Just then Eradicate, who was out in the hall, rushed in and the man turned on him, giving poor Rad a blow that knocked him down.

"What happened after that I don't know, except that I saw, in a daze, Mrs. Baggert enter the room and the man spring at her. Then I must have fainted. When I came to myself I was being looked after by Dr. Clayton. But

I'm all right now. We must get after this rascal, Tom."

"Certainly we will, Dad. But who was he? What does he look like? A red-haired man has been mentioned."

"Yes, Tom, this fellow had closely-cropped red hair. I have never seen him before that I know of."

"Had you, Rad?" asked the youth.

"No, Massa Tom. I was sweepin' out in de hall an' I had my back to de do'. I didn't see de fellah go in. But I heard yo' pa yell, den I bust in."

"What happened then?" Tom wanted to know, while Ned made notes in shorthand of the answers, so he and Tom could go over it later.

"Well, de mostest whut happen is dat me an' dat fellah come togetha," explained Rad. "I went fo' to hit him, but he done hit me fust! Golly, ef dey was ebber a time when I done wish fo' dat giant, it was den!"

"Do all the descriptions of this man tally?" asked Tom. "I mean does Mrs. Baggert also say he was a stranger with red hair?"

"Yes," answered Mr. Swift. "I questioned her about that before you got here. The fellow surely had red hair cut close to his head."

"Did he get away with anything?" asked Tom quickly. "I mean any of our plans? What

papers did you have out on the desk when he burst in on you, Dad?"

"They were the plans of both the tidal engine and the mill machinery that I was glancing over, you asked me to verify your figures, you know," was the answer. "But he didn't get any."

The excitement was extreme while it lasted, but it was over now. Inquiries developed the fact that none of the employes in the office had seen the mysterious red-haired stranger enter or leave.

He had been evolved out of thin air, it seemed, and had vanished into the same element. That he had had his trouble for his pains was evident, for a careful check-up showed that none of the tidal engine papers was missing, nor had any of the mill machinery plans been taken from Mr. Swift.

"How about my chest of stuff?" asked Tom anxiously.

"It's all right," his father informed him. "I looked at that as soon as I felt able. It's locked and still in place."

"Good!" cried Tom. "And now we must get busy and solve this mystery."

Making sure that his father, Rad and Mrs. Baggert were really in no danger, Tom took a bath to remove some of the grime of his recent

experiences and then sent a couple of his men over to the pine tree in which the *Hummer* had lodged.

"I'm afraid the plane's a goner," Tom said. "But maybe you can save part of her. The engine ought to be good, anyhow."

This having been done, and as it was now late in the day, Tom closed the office, first, however, arranging to have Koku take up his sleeping quarters there to be on guard every night.

"If the red-haired chap returns, he'll meet with a different reception this time," Tom said to Ned.

He and Ned made a careful check-up on all the incidents connected with the attempted robbery and assault. They looked about the place for clues, but found none of any moment. Nor could any one be found who had seen the scoundrel make his way to Mr. Swift's room.

The young inventor had not forgotten what Mary had told him about the conversation in the restaurant, and he called up the proprietor on the telephone. But that individual could give him no information concerning the fellows who had had their meal there.

It was natural that Tom's mind should jump to the latest acquisition to his working force—the man Barsky. Somewhat suspicious of him from the first, and these suspicions added to by

his father's ominous shake of the head and his expressed doubts of the Russian, Tom decided to keep an eye on the fellow.

It was almost closing time in the shops when Dr. Clayton had gone, leaving all his patients in good shape, and when Tom and Ned had been informed as to the main points in the matter. With his suspicions fermenting, Tom hurried over to the pattern shop.

It was with mingled feelings that he saw Barsky hard at work on certain important models. Tom passed the fellow and spoke to him, saying casually:

"It will soon be quitting time."

"Eet matters not to me—hours," replied the man in his strong accent. "When I work I think not of time. I am of much interest in my profession."

"Yes, it's a good thing to be so interested," returned Tom dryly.

He passed on, but took a position where he could watch the man without himself being observed.

It was hot in the workshop. Beads of perspiration came out on Barsky's forehead, and as he mopped them away with a big, blue handkerchief, Tom, from his hiding place, saw something that made him exclaim:

"The fellow's wearing a wig!"

Wild ideas ran through Tom Swift's mind.

"I'll set a trap for him," he decided.

The quitting whistle blew. True to his statement, the Russian worked on, though other men laid aside their tools. Tom remained in his hiding place, but it was now getting dark in the shop and he could see little.

It was not until shortly before noon the following day that Tom had a chance to put into operation his plan of laying a trap for Barsky. In the meanwhile nothing new had developed in the matter of discovering the red-haired man.

Carrying out his plan, Tom went to a small room in the rear of his office where he sometimes carried out delicate experiments. From there he caused to be sent to the suspect a message that he was wanted.

The approach to this little room was along a narrow corridor where there was not room for two to pass. When Tom heard Barsky approaching in answer to the summons, the young inventor hurried out, timing himself to meet the Russian in the corridor. To keep the matter secret, Tom had arranged to be alone in this part of the building.

"Ah, you sent for me, Mr. Swift?" asked the man. "Eet is a plaisair for to come to so distinguished an inventor."

Thus the man exclaimed as he saw Tom com-

ing toward him out of the little room. But Tom gave the fellow no chance to do anything, had such been his intention.

Brushing up against the suspect, as though to pass him in the narrow corridor, Tom raised his hand and brushed the big mop of black hair on Barsky's head.

A moment later the wig of hair came off and with it the bushy black beard that all but hid the fellow's face.

"Ah, I thought so!" cried Tom, as he saw closely cropped red hair, heretofore hidden by the wig. "You're a prison bird all right, Barsky—or whatever your name is. I've found you out!"

For a moment the man was so taken by surprise that he could only stand with open mouth, gasping.

Then, suddenly, rage seemed to take possession of the red-haired rascal—the same sort of rage that must have actuated him in his attack on Mr. Swift, Eradicate and Mrs. Baggert. Before he could speak, however, Tom cried:

"You're through here, you dirty scoundrel! Get your time and clear out! And don't think you're going to have it end there. I'm going to have you arrested!"

"Oh, you are, eh?" sneered the man, and, realizing that his disguise had been effectually

penetrated, all trace of his pretended Russian accent disappeared. He spoke ordinary English. "So you think you've found me out, do you? Well, you've got another guess coming, Tom Swift! I'm not half through with you!"

"You mean I'm not through with you!" replied Tom. "You're an imposter! I have been suspecting you for some time, and my father has from the first. Now we'll have a settlement!"

"But first I'll settle with you!" cried the fellow, whose rage was on the increase. His lips closed tightly and he clenched his hands. These should have been warning signs to Tom, but they were not.

A moment later, kicking aside the wig and false beard, the fellow made a jump for the young inventor. Whether he held concealed in his hand some object like a black-jack, was never found out. But the fellow gave Tom such a blow on the head that the young inventor crumpled up and went down in a heap. Blackness closed over him and in his ears a multitude of bells seemed to ring.

CHAPTER XVI

BOUND IN DARKNESS

NED NEWTON was rather puzzled over Tom's long absence from the office. The day had passed and the young inventor had been at his usual desk for only a brief period in the morning. He had told Ned he was going into the little testing room and would soon be back.

Ned knew that Tom did not like to be disturbed when conducting experiments and tests in this "cubby-hole," as it was called, for it was made small purposely to avoid air drafts and vibrations. So when noon came and Tom did not appear for dinner, nothing much was thought of it, as he frequently missed a meal.

"But this time I have chicken and dumplings," complained Mrs. Baggert. "And Tom is so fond of them!"

"He doesn't know what he's missing," commented Ned, who always ate lunch with the Swifts, as time was saved by not going to his own home.

"I'll save him some," remarked the kind-hearted housekeeper.

Noon passed, and the afternoon was waning when a message came over the telephone that needed Tom's personal attention. He had left orders that, no matter what he was doing, he should be summoned when this call came in. So Ned, believing his friend was in the little experiment room, hastened there, leaving Mr. Newton, who was back in Shopton, looking white and worried, to hold the wire.

But Tom was not in the little room. Nor was he in the corridor where Barsky, in a fit of rage at being discovered, had knocked the young inventor senseless.

"Hum, this is queer," mused Ned. But no suspicion as yet entered his head. "He must have gone back to the office by the outside way," for this was possible.

Hurrying back to the main room Ned did not meet his chum. Then began a hurried search for the missing youth, still with no thought that anything was wrong. It was merely believed that he had left the experiment room to go to some other part of the works, as he often did. Accordingly, the intercommunication telephone system was worked to the limit. But from the foreman of each department came the reply:

"Mr. Swift isn't here, nor has he been here."

From the pattern room came the report:

"Mr. Swift not here, but he ought to come here."

"Why?" asked Ned.

"Because," replied the foreman, "that new Russian workman he hired has gone away and left a valuable pattern half glued. It will be ruined if it isn't finished and placed in the vise to set. But none of the men knows anything about it, and I don't either. Mr. Swift gave special orders that Barsky was to be allowed to work in his own way on that train-stop matter, and we don't like to interfere. But I know enough about pattern making to feel sure this one will be spoiled if it isn't finished soon."

"I'll see if I can find Mr. Swift and send him to you," promised Ned.

But Tom could not be found in any of the shop departments, nor was he in his rooms at home. He had not been seen there since early morning, Mrs. Baggert stated.

Still no alarm was felt. Often in the excitement of following up a new idea or completing an invention on which he had been working a long time, Tom would slip off by himself, either to be alone with his thoughts or to try out something that had occurred to him. And often he said nothing to any one of his intention.

"That's probably what he's done now," remarked Ned, and so little was thought of the matter that Mr. Swift was not informed, for it did not occur to any one but that Tom would come back by evening.

"He might be over at Mary Nestor's house," suggested Mr. Newton, when the person who had called Tom on the telephone had been told to ring up later in the day.

"That's so," agreed the young manager. "It's the most likely place to find him. I should have thought of that before."

But Mary also answered in the negative. Tom was not there.

"Is anything the matter?" she asked, influenced to do so perhaps by an anxious note in Ned's voice.

"Oh, no; nothing wrong," he said. "It's just an important message for him. He'll be around soon, I guess."

But Tom Swift was far from "being around."

Ten thousand years seemed to pass while the young inventor lay in a fog of incoherence. At least, it appeared to Tom to be ten thousand years—perhaps longer.

Slowly he opened his eyes, but the darkness about him was so intense that he thought it was still an effect of the cowardly blow, which he now remembered. But in a moment he knew

that his eyes were open and that he was staring out of them, but without seeing anything.

The blackness was profound—like a piece of black velvet wrapped about him.

And then, as he tried to move and found that he could not, Tom knew that he was bound—bound with ropes and in a dark and strange place.

“I surely am up against it!” he muttered.

CHAPTER XVII

OUT OF THE CISTERN

"WHERE am I and what happened?" Tom asked himself. Rather futile and hackneyed questions, but they were just the points Tom desired to be informed about.

Much easier it was to reconstruct what had happened than it was to answer the first question as to where he was. Beyond the fact that he was in some dark place—very dark—and that it was damp and noisome, Tom could not imagine where he had been taken.

It was coming back to him now, and he helped his dazed brain to clear by talking aloud to himself. He realized that he was alone—or so he judged—for his first exclamation after recovering consciousness had brought forth no answer.

"Let's see now," mused the youth. "I knocked off Barsky's wig and false beard and saw that he had close-cropped red hair. This makes him, beyond doubt, the scoundrel who attacked dad and the others. It also makes me

think this Barsky is a prison bird, or has been at one time.

"He got mad when I fired him, and he came at me. I remember that, but it's the last thing I do remember. He must have given me a crack on the head with a black-jack and knocked me out. It happened in the little passage near the experiment room, and no one saw it. Then he must have tied me up and carried me here—wherever this is."

And Tom would have given a goodly sum, just then, to know exactly where he was. It did not seem possible that Barsky could have packed him into an automobile and carried him far away.

"He would have been seen by some one in the office or the shops," reasoned Tom. "Therefore I must be hidden in some place not very far from my own home or the office. Now where is there a locality like this around our shops?"

Having thus considerably narrowed the inquiry, Tom further simplified it by a process of elimination. He sensed that he was in some place below the level of the ground. The close, stuffy atmosphere of his prison proved that.

"And it's damp, too," mused Tom. "It has held water! Ah, I have it—the old cistern under the first shop we built!"

When the Swift Construction Company was first started it was in a modest way, with only a small shop. Beneath this Mr. Swift had had built a large cistern for the storage of rain water, which, because of its softness, or non-chemical quality, was needed in his experiments. Later, when the business grew and the little old shop was abandoned, the cistern was emptied and closed, a larger storage tank being built in another place.

Entrance to the abandoned cistern could be gained by a trap door in the floor of the shop, but as Tom remembered there was no ladder in the reservoir.

"Barsky must have lowered me in here with a rope," thought Tom. "Then he simply dropped the cover on and ran away. It was clever of him. Now he has time to work some of his plans, I suppose. This is all a deep-laid plot, and it's been in the making some time. I wish I had taken dad's advice and never hired that fellow! However, it's too late to think about that now! I must get myself out of here and stop him—that is, if it isn't too late!"

Tom managed to squirm to a sitting position. This made him feel better, but it sent the blood again rushing into his sore head, and for a moment or two he felt dizzy and sick. This passed, however, and he began to reason matters out.

"I could shout my lungs out," reasoned Tom, "and no one would hear me. But, wait! I remember something. The tunnel! It's all right! I can get out if I can free myself!"

With the further clearing of his brain it occurred to Tom that some years before he and his father had had dug a tunnel, leading from a distant hillside into the cistern. The tunnel passed beneath the foundations of the old shop and the passage was used to conduct some experiments in the action of air currents. Aeroplane models, as one knows, are tested in what is called a wind tunnel, and the Swift underground tunnel was one of the first of these ever made. It had not been used for a long time, however, and the end, opening under the hill, had been boarded up.

"But if I can get loose I can walk along the tunnel and I guess I can manage to kick down those boards," thought Tom. "However, the question is, can I get loose?"

At first it seemed that this must be answered in the negative. So firmly had Barsky made the bonds that Tom tugged and strained for some time, to his no small discomfort, without any effect.

At last, however, he felt the ropes around his hands, which had been tied behind his back, giving a little. This encouraged him, and, grit-

ting his teeth to keep back involuntary exclamations of pain, he strained harder. It was out of his power to break them, but the ropes stretched a little, and at last, after hard work, he managed to get his hands free.

But such was the cruel force with which the cords had been knotted and so long had they been on the captive's wrists that, even though his hands were now free, he had little use of them. They were numb and helpless. Like limbs "asleep" and, as Tom said afterward, they felt as big as sofa cushions.

They soon, however, began to tingle as the blood resumed its circulation, and with the sensation of pins and needles pricking his fingers, Tom began to feel that he could use his hands.

This he did in loosening the cords around his feet, and in a few minutes more he was able to stand up, free to move about and take up the matter of getting out of the cistern.

It was as dark as a pocket in there, and Tom wished he had with him a small electric flashlight. Almost always he carried one, but this time, just when it was most needed, he was without it.

"But I guess I can go by feeling," he told himself. "This cistern isn't so immense. It's circular, and no matter where I start on the wall I'm bound to come to the tunnel opening some

time or other. I guess it's a mighty good thing," grimly thought Tom, "that there's no water in this place. No thanks to Barsky, I guess, that there isn't. He'd have dropped me in just the same, I believe."

Tom, with outstretched hands, began to grope his way about in the dark cistern. He knew there were no holes in the floor, so he did not fear a fall, and there was nothing with which he could collide. From the length of time it took him to reach the wall, Tom judged that he had been lying about in the center of the old water-container. This proved his theory that Barsky had lowered him into it from the trap door above.

Once Tom was in contact with the circular wall of the cistern, it was an easy matter to follow it around until he came to the tunnel opening.

"This way out!" exclaimed the young inventor grimly. "I wonder what time it is and how long I've been in here. Maybe they're looking for me up above. And yet, perhaps they think I'm just off on one of my trips."

Tom started into the black tunnel. It had been several years since it had been put to use, and the youth had not entered it during all that time. Consequently he proceeded a bit cautiously, for he did not know but what there

might be holes here and there in the floor of it.

After about five minutes of careful progress Tom felt on his face a cool current of air.

"I'm coming to the boarded-up opening!" he exclaimed exultingly.

The boards did not fit tightly, and through one of the larger cracks Tom caught a glint of light.

"But it's starlight!" he cried. "It's night! I must have been in that cistern all day—maybe two days! Though I guess not two days or I'd feel hungrier and thirstier than I am."

Pushing on the boards, Tom felt them give a little, and he knew they must have rotted away from contact with the damp earth. He pushed harder and kicked on them, thus knocking down the barrier.

In rushed the glorious fresh air, and the young inventor saw that he was looking out on a field some distance away from his home. It was night, and the stars were glittering. Also, not far away from the tunnel entrance another light was gleaming. It was the light of a lantern set on the ground.

By the gleam of the lantern on the ground Tom could see a figure moving about and, seemingly, digging in the earth.

"This is queer," mused the lad. "I wonder who that is? If it's Barsky, maybe he's dig-

ging to try to get at some of my secrets. Or maybe he thinks I'm dead and he's making a grave for me."

Tom dismissed this gruesome thought with a laugh, and walked forward a few paces, the better to see who was doing that queer midnight digging by lantern light.

Some noise Tom made attracted the notice of the digger. He looked toward the tunnel opening, and then Tom exclaimed:

"Good night! It's Rad!"

At that moment, the colored man, with a cry of fear, made a jump, knocking over and extinguishing the lantern while he shouted:

"De ghost! De ghost! I's a daid darkey! I's done seen a h'ant! Oh, lawzy, lawzy! De ghost am after me!"

CHAPTER XVIII

TWO DISAPPEARANCES

DESPITE the fact that he was tired, upset in his mind and that his head was beginning to ache again, Tom Swift could not help laughing at the fright shown by Eradicate as the colored man made the best time possible away from the "ghost."

"Come back here, Rad! Come back! Nothing's going to hurt you!" cried Tom, running down toward the upset lantern. "I'm no ghost!"

Hearing his master's voice, the colored man halted. Still not altogether convinced, he stood looking back and ready to run, as he asked:

"Am dat—am dat you, Massa Tom?"

"Of course it is, Rad! Who else would it be? I came out of the old cistern."

"Oh, den you's daid! You shore am daid an' it's yo' h'ant I sees!"

Eradicate would have run away again, but Tom called more sternly:

"Wait a minute! Don't be foolish! Of course I'm not dead, though I'm in pretty bad

shape after what that scoundrel Barsky did to me. Have they been looking for me, Rad?"

"Yes, Massa Tom—dat is, ef you is Massa Tom," he added, as a qualifying remark. "Dey has been done lookin' fo' you. But we done thought you gone off to see Massa Damon, maybe, and maybe you done took dat Barsky with you, 'case he's done gone, too!"

"Yes, I reckon he's gone all right!" muttered Tom. "But I've been around here all the while, Rad. Barsky knocked me senseless, bound me, and dropped me into the cistern under the old shop. I just managed to get out through the tunnel."

"Yes, sah, Massa Tom. I's mighty glad you done got out. But is you suah—is you quite suah—Massa Tom, dat you isn't a ghost?"

"Of course I'm sure!" laughed the young man. "What makes you think I'm a ghost?"

"'Case as how you's all white like."

Then Tom looked down at his clothes and saw that he was covered with a white powdery substance which must, in the darkness, have given him a weird appearance, especially to the superstitious colored man.

"It's chalk dust, or something like that," said Tom, as he slapped at his coat sleeves and trouser legs, thereby setting free a haze of white, powdery stuff. "I remember now that there

are soft white rocks in the earth of the cistern and the tunnel. I must have brushed off a lot of the stuff on my clothes as I came along. No wonder you took me for a ghost."

"Yes, sah, dat's jest whut you done look like," said Eradicate.

"Well, you know now that I'm no ghost, don't you?" asked Tom, as he continued to get rid of the white dust on his clothes.

"Um—yes, sah, I done reckon so," answered the colored man, a bit doubtfully. "Anyhow, you *says* so, Massa Tom, an' whut you *says* mus' be so."

"It is in this case, anyhow," replied the youth. "But it isn't Barsky's fault that I'm not a ghost. Now we'll go back to the house and relieve their anxiety, for I suppose they must have been a little anxious about me, Rad."

"Oh, yes, sah, dey has done been huntin' all ober fo' you," was the answer. "Yo' pa, he done think you done gone to Mr. Damon's. But Massa Ned he know better, 'case as how Mr. Damon say on the tellyfoam dat you isn't dere. Koku, he out lookin' fo' you, too."

"Were you also looking for me, Rad?" asked Tom. "And, like Diogenes searching for an honest man, were you looking for me with a lantern? Or were you digging to find my body?"

"I doan know dat fellah doggoneyourknees,"

stated Eradicate. "An' I was goin' to look fo' you right soon. But jest now I come out to dig fo' night-walker worms. I's gwine fishin' to-morrow."

"Oh, so that's why you were so mysteriously digging, was it?" chuckled Tom. "After night-walkers! Well, I guess I'd better do a little night walking, myself, back to the house and tell Ned he needn't get up a searching party for me. Light your lantern, Rad, and get all the worms you can. Good luck to you!"

"Yes, sah," murmured the colored man, who often went out in the fields and garden at night to dig for the big worms that did not venture abroad until after dark. "An' I's mighty glad, Massa Tom, dat you isn't a h'ant!"

"The same here," chuckled Tom.

The young inventor decided to see Ned before going into his own house, and a little later he was being greeted with delighted surprise by Ned and Mr. Newton, who were much puzzled to account for the long-continued absence of the young inventor. It was now close to midnight, and he had disappeared in the morning.

"Well, for the love of my cash balance, what has happened to you, Tom?" cried Ned, as he greeted his chum.

"Lots," was the brief answer. "Have you seen that scoundrel Barsky?"

"Barsky!" cried Ned. "Why, we thought you had taken him away to some quiet place to work on your train-stop invention. But we've been a bit worried about you for some time, and when, a little while ago, Mr. Damon said you weren't at his place and Mrs. Baggert telephoned that you had not come home, we didn't know what to tell your father. We've been keeping from him the fact that you haven't been seen for a number of hours, and dad and I were just wondering how much longer we could keep him in ignorance."

"Well, I'm glad you didn't have to worry him," said Tom. "I'm all right now. But we've got to catch this Barsky. Where's Koku?"

"Out looking for you, I imagine. He seemed to think you might be about the grounds somewhere."

"I was. In the old cistern. I got out through the tunnel."

Tom quickly told all that had occurred up to the time when Eradicate mistook him for a ghost.

"Whew!" whistled Ned. "This means something, Tom! Those fellows are getting desperate!"

"I should say so!" agreed the young inventor. "I don't just see what the game is, but it's a

deep one, I'm afraid. I must look at once to my chest of secrets."

"It was all right when I left the office, Tom," said Mr. Newton. "I looked at it the last thing."

"I'm taking no chances," was the grim reply. "I'll just let my father know I've come back. Let him suppose that I have been over to Waterford. Don't tell him what happened. It would do no good and only worry him. Then we'll make some plans for catching this fellow Barsky and those in with him. For he isn't working alone, I'm sure of that."

"No, I suppose not," returned Ned. "But now, Tom, you'd better go home and get some rest. It's nearly midnight."

"No, no, Ned! The first thing is to look around the shops and the yards. It's better not to let the trail grow any colder."

"Tom's right," declared Mr. Newton. "And Ned and I will go over with you, lad."

Tom Swift looked at the older man and, seeing how white and weary he looked, he protested. But to his protests Ned's father would not listen. Though the strain of the suspense and his shame over the question of his honesty in the matter of the theft of the Liberty Bonds—a matter which was by no means cleared up—was telling heavily against him and was deplet-

ing his strength, Mr. Newton insisted on accompanying Tom and Ned to the Swift home and the shops.

Though Mr. Swift had been given no intimation that there was anything wrong with the continued absence of his son, yet the aged inventor had begun to worry slightly. However, this was ended when he knew Tom was in the house, and then the old gentleman went to bed.

Tom, with the Newtons, made an inspection of the shop and found everything apparently all right there, with the chest locked and in its usual place in the small room.

Koku came back from one of his tours of the grounds, and he was delighted to find his master had returned.

"You must keep specially good watch to-night, Koku," said Tom when the place had been looked over. "I've got to take something to stop my headache, and I'll probably sleep like a top."

"Koku watch," was the grim answer. "Bad mans come—Koku knock 'um in mince pie pieces!" and he clenched his big fists.

Though much puzzled over what had happened, Tom realized that little could be done toward solving the problem until he had had some rest, food and sleep. His head was aching and he had a queer sense of foreboding.

"But I guess I'll be all right after I've had a good night's sleep," he told himself.

The Newtons went home, Eradicate had long before come in from his worm-digging expedition, and by one o'clock the house, grounds and shops of the Swift company were shrouded in darkness and silence.

Tom awakened the next morning, feeling much refreshed. As soon as he was out of bed and had eaten breakfast he began to make plans for apprehending the man who had attacked him.

"If I get this fellow Barsky—though I don't believe that's his name—I may be able to trace the others in the plot," reasoned Tom. "For I believe he's acting with others. He was the spy. I must find Barsky!"

Tom hurried over to his office. It was early, neither Ned nor his father having arrived, and Tom was the first one to enter.

"Hello, Koku!" he called, for the giant slept in the place. "Any trouble during the night?"

There was no answer.

"He must be sleeping yet," thought Tom. "Well, we were all up a bit late." He went into the room where his chest of secrets, as Ned had named it, was kept, and the instant he opened the door Tom saw that the oak box was gone!

"They've got it!" he cried. "Koku! Come

here! Where are you? How does it happen that my chest is gone? You're a fine watchman!"

He threw open the door of the room where the giant slept.

Koku, too was gone!

CHAPTER XIX

KOKU IS FOUND

TOM SWIFT lost little time in putting into operation such means as were at his command for tracing the missing chest of secrets and the vanished giant.

He pressed certain push buttons connected with distant summoning bells, located in different parts of the works, and soon there came flocking into his office several of his foremen and Garret Jackson, who had general charge of the works.

As the last of these helpers arrived, Ned Newton and his father reached the office for the day's work, and it was with no little surprise that they observed this gathering.

"What's wrong, Tom?" cried Ned. "Has anything happened?"

"I should say there has!" cried the young inventor. "My chest of secrets has been taken away!"

"Whew!" whistled Ned.

"With Koku here to guard it!" cried Mr. Newton. "How was that possible?"

"Well, the robbers took Koku also," explained Tom. "He's gone, and so is my chest."

"Both gone!" cried Mr. Jackson. "Is there any coincidence here, Tom? Maybe Koku took the chest!"

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Tom. "I'd trust that giant with my last dollar. Besides, Koku hasn't any more notion of the value of the plans and patent papers in my chest than he has of how to work out a cross-word puzzle. It isn't in him to plan or carry out anything like this, even if he had the wish, which he hasn't."

"What's your theory, Tom, of the two disappearing at the same time?" asked Ned.

"Well, Koku must have surprised the robbers at work lifting my chest out," explained Tom. "That being so, he went at them. They killed him and carried him off with them, or else his body is hidden around here somewhere. That's why I summoned you men," he went on to his foremen. "I want a search made of every part of the house and grounds. Let the work go for the day. Koku and the chest must be found!"

"It would take a pretty big and husky bunch of robbers to overcome Koku," suggested Ned.

"And if there was such a big gang here they would have made a noise, which I should think you'd have heard up at the house, Tom."

"I didn't hear a thing. Perhaps having taken a headache powder would account for that. But neither Eradicate nor Mrs. Baggert heard anything out of the ordinary, I'm sure, or they would have said something about it to me. As for dad, when he goes to bed he sleeps, and does little else."

"Even if you didn't hear a row, Tom, there must have been one," insisted Ned. "Koku wouldn't let that chest be taken away without a fight, and when he starts to fight something breaks."

"Yes, that's the puzzling part of it," admitted the young inventor. "There isn't any evidence of anything having been disturbed here. But I found one of the outer doors open, and the electric alarm cut, which shows how the robbers entered and left. They probably used a skeleton key to open the place, and didn't lock the door after them when they left. I wish I had done what I've been planning to do—kept my plans in a burglar-proof vault. Now I'm going to start to build one right here."

"Any signs of a fight or a struggle in Koku's bedroom?" asked the foreman of the pattern shop.

"No. The clothes are thrown back off the bed as though the giant got up in the usual way," answered Tom. "There is no sign of violence. But several heads are better than one, and that's why I summoned you all here—I'd like your advice on the matter."

The men were trained observers, quick and accurate in their work, as they needs must be to build the complicated machines evolved by Tom Swift and his father. In a sense, they were as good observers as detectives would have been, and Tom did not want to call in the police. He did not want his loss broadcasted.

"This is fierce!" exclaimed Ned, as the extent of the loss was more fully realized. He and Tom were sitting in the office while the foremen moved about the place, looking for possible clues in the place where the chest had stood, in Koku's room, and outside the building.

"It sure is," agreed the young inventor. "All my plans for the train-stopping device were in that chest. Now they're gone, and I have no duplicates!"

"And your tidal engine, too," suggested Ned.

"Yes," sighed Tom. "I guess my dream of harnessing the ocean will not be realized for some time. Of course I may be able to work out the ideas in some other way, but it means a big loss. And there are other papers, too.

There were dad's designs of the gyroscope flier, and——"

"What's that about my gyroscope flier?" asked Mr. Swift, at that moment entering the place. "I've come for those plans now, Tom. I have just thought of a new idea in connection with the engine."

"I'm afraid you can't have the plans, Dad," returned the son. "They're gone! The whole chest of secrets has been stolen!"

Tom had been debating in his mind whether or not to tell his father the bad news, fearing the effect it might have on the elderly man's heart. But Barton Swift was no weakling. Like a charger sniffing the powder of battle from afar, he drew himself up and together at the same time crying:

"So our enemies are at some of their old tricks, are they, Tom? Well, don't let them see that we mind! Don't show the white feather. We'll fight 'em, Tom! We'll fight 'em!"

"That's the talk!" cried Ned, while Tom was much delighted to note that his father took the blow standing up.

"I can reconstruct those gyroscope plans!" cried the old man. "I remember most of them, though it will set me back very much to have them taken. Of course it's a big loss, Tom. The whole chestful gone! How did it happen?"

He was told, and then he confirmed Tom's first idea that he had heard nothing during the night to indicate an attack on the shop.

"I done t'ink I heard somethin'," Eradicate said when they asked him about the matter. "It was a sort of hootin', hollerin' sound. But I figgered it was an owl bird, an' I went to sleep again!"

"That was probably Koku shouting at the robbers," decided Tom. "He's either still after them or they've done for him."

"Koku gone?" cried Rad, and when told him that the giant was missing the colored man forgot all his petty animosity against the big fellow and expressed only sympathy. "I's gwine to find him!" declared Eradicate. "I go look for him!"

Tom did not pay much attention to his colored helper, since there were other matters that needed his attention. The net result of the searching on the part of his men was nothing. There were no clues that could be followed. Reconstructing the crime, it was thought that the gang of men had gained entrance by means of a false key. Then, being unable to open the chest because of the special locks on it, they had carried it away.

Surprised at this by Koku, they must have silenced the giant in some manner and have car-

ried him off while he was unconscious. Doubtless an auto was used, though so many of these came and went at the Swift office that the tire marks of no special one could be picked out.

"All that remains is for us to make a search," suggested Tom. "And we have this much to go on—that I suspect my chest was stolen by the same men, or some representing them, whose offer I turned down when Mr. Damon made it on behalf of Mr. Blythe."

"Then why not have Mr. Damon over here," suggested Mr. Swift. "He may be able to give us some clues as to these scoundrels."

"I'll do it!" cried Tom, and he sent an airship for Wakefield Damon at once.

"Bless my fire insurance policy, Tom Swift, but this is a terrible affair!" cried the odd man when he entered the office a little later. "I wouldn't have had it happen for a million dollars! Bless my check book if I would! And it's all my fault."

"How do you make that out?" asked Tom, with a smile.

"I was foolish enough to bring you that offer from Mr. Blythe, though I took it in good faith, and never knew he was such a scoundrel! To think of his kidnapping Koku and taking your chest."

"Blythe didn't do it!" exclaimed Tom. "Nor

did he have anything to do with it! Blythe isn't that kind of a man. I know that from my oil-gusher dealings with him. Doubtless he has been deceived by these men as I was deceived by Barsky. And I think if we could get hold of Barsky we'd have the key that would unlock this whole puzzle. Why we sent for you, Mr. Damon, is to ask if you could give us any clues as to the men associated with Blythe."

"I think I can," was the answer. "Oh, Tom Swift, to think that such a thing could happen! Bless my overshoes! it's enough to make a man a misanthrope all the rest of his life."

By dint of further questioning Tom and Ned gleaned certain facts from Mr. Damon, and these were a little later communicated to Mr. Plum, the lawyer, with instructions to set certain confidential investigators at work in distant cities.

"Do you think, Mr. Plum, that this robbery here had any connection with the theft of the Liberty Bonds of which my father is accused?" asked Ned.

"I don't know," was the answer. "It's possible. There's no obvious connection, but I'll check up on the matter and let you know."

With this Tom and Ned had to be content for the time being. After all the information possible had been collected, the foremen went back

to their shops and work was resumed. Mr. Swift at once began to redraw his gyroscope plans, and Tom, sick at heart over his big loss, late in the afternoon spoke to Ned about the advisability of going for a ride across country.

"We might get a trace of Koku or the robbers in that way," Tom said.

"Good idea," commented Ned. "It will be something to be on the move. Nothing is worse than sitting still waiting for news. Come on."

As they were about to start in the electric run-about, Eradicate, who had disappeared soon after the discovery of the robbery, came hurrying to the garage.

"Massa Tom! Massa Tom!" cried the colored man, much excited. "I's done found 'im!"

"Found them? You mean Koku and my chest of secrets?" shouted the young inventor.

"No, I didn't find de chest, but I found Koku! I found dat big giant!"

"Is he—is he dead?" faltered Tom.

"No, Massa Tom. Dat giant's off in de woods tied to a tree! I couldn't loose de ropes or I'd a set him free. Dat's why I came back fo' you all. But I done found Koku!"

CHAPTER XX

MANY STRANGE CLEWS

"COME on, Rad! Hop in! Show us where Koku is and we'll soon have him loose!" cried Tom, as he motioned to the rear of the runabout, for he and Ned were seated in front.

"How is Koku taking being tied up?" asked Ned while the colored man climbed in as quickly as his rheumatic joints would allow. "Is Koku mad?"

"Mad? He done froth at de mouth!" cried the old servant. "By golly, I wouldn't like to be de one whut done tied him up after he gits free!"

"Koku would be one of the best fellows in the world to take along on the search for the robbers, Tom," suggested Ned. "He'll be so angry he can easily handle half a dozen with one hand—if there should prove to be that many in the gang."

"Shouldn't wonder but what there are more than that in the plot," agreed Tom. "It's a

queer game! But come on. We must help Koku. Where is he, Rad?"

"Over by Lake Carlopa—dat place where you and me used to go fishin'."

"You mean Chestnut Point?"

"Dat's de place, Massa Tom,"

"A lonely region," remarked the young inventor, as he started the runabout. "They couldn't have picked out a better—or rather, a worse—place to leave poor Koku. How'd you happen to think of looking there, Rad?"

"Well, Massa Tom, I t'ought maybe Koku might go there of his own se'f. Onct I kotched a big fish there, an' I was tellin' him 'bout it. He always said he could kotch a bigger fish'n whut I did. So I t'ought maybe he was tryin' to beat me, an' maybe de robbers didn't tuk him after all. So I looked an' I done see him tied to a tree!"

The run to Chestnut Point did not take long, and, following the directions of Eradicate, Tom guided his machine along a lonely road. They had traversed this a short distance when Ned cried:

"Hark!"

"What did you think you heard?" asked Tom, shutting off the motor to render the machine silent.

"Some one calling," answered Ned. "Listen!"

A loud voice was borne to their ears by the wind, and Tom had no sooner heard it than he cried:

"That's Koku! And he sure is mad!"

The giant was like an enraged bull, but so securely was he bound to a tree with many strong ropes and straps that even his great strength was of no avail, especially as he was so cunningly bound that he was unable to exert his full strength.

"Good you come, Master Tom," grunted Koku, as he saw his friends approaching in a run. "You friend of mine from now on, Rad—you bring help to me."

"Cou'se I's you' friend," chuckled Eradicate. "De only time when we has any disputations is when you tries to take my place wif Massa Tom."

It was the work of some time for Ned and Tom, even with their sharp knives, to cut the straps and the ropes, the knots of which had proved too hard for the colored man to loosen. Then, working his great arms and striding up and down amid the trees to restore his stagnant circulation, the giant cried:

"Where are 'um? Where are 'um mans that tied me? Once I git 'um—I mince pie 'um!"

"Guess he's heard the expression 'make mince meat of them,'" remarked Ned to Tom.

"Very likely. But I've got to get him quieted down so I can question him. He will be the best one to give us clues by which we may trace these fellows."

Accordingly Tom talked to his giant helper and finally got an account of what had happened. Tom could do more with Koku and understand his peculiar English better than any one else. Also Tom knew something of the giant's own language.

Gradually a coherent story emerged. Koku had been left on guard the previous night in Tom's private office building, following the attack on the young inventor. The early part of the evening had passed without anything to disturb the giant's sleep. Later, however, the alarm bell over his bed rang. Tom had not trusted altogether to his giant remaining awake when on guard, and, as old readers know, the whole place was wired in burglar alarm fashion.

So that, even though the door was opened with a skeleton key, as was proved later to have been done, the swinging of the portal set off one signal, the wire to which had remained intact, and Koku awakened.

He had been awakened some months before by the alarm bell, but that time it was Tom himself who entered the place late at night to

make notes on a certain plan before he should forget the idea that occurred to him. Tom forgot about the burglar alarm, and set it off, bringing Koku running with a gun in his hands.

Of course Tom laughed at the incident, but Koku now remembered this, and, thinking it might be another false alarm, he did not at once rush to the floor below, but proceeded cautiously. If the intruder should prove to be some one with a right to enter, Koku would go back to bed again.

Going down softly, and looking in the room where the big oak box was kept, the giant saw several strange men trying to force the locks. This being beyond them, one of the men had cried, as Koku understood it:

"Let's take the whole shooting match along! The *Blue Bird* will carry it and we can open it in the woods."

So they had picked up Tom Swift's chest of secrets and carried it out of the office. Even then Koku did not give the alarm, for his brain did not work as fast as the brain of an ordinary person. Then, too, the giant thought he had plenty of time, and could, when he got ready, sweep the robbers off their feet and take the chest away from them.

But he delayed too long. Following the men—there were eight of them, he counted on his

fingers—Koku went out of the office building into the darkness. The men carried the chest to a large automobile that was waiting in the road, the motor running and the lights off. Then, just as they loaded it in and Koku was about to spring on them, the men discovered his presence and jumped on the giant before he could get into action.

Even a little man will have the advantage of a much larger and more powerful fellow if the little man gets started first, and this was what happened in the case of Koku. Besides, there were eight of the robbers, and though under some circumstances Koku might have been able to fight eight, or even ten men, taken as he was by surprise, he was knocked down.

He struggled, but the men threw "something into his face" that stung and made him "feel funny" and he was gagged, bound and lifted into the auto, though his weight made the men "grunt like pigs," as the giant expressed it.

So the thing happened, and Koku, helpless, a little stunned, and silent, was driven off in the night, no struggle at all having taken place in the office.

Where he was taken the giant did not know in the darkness. But after a while he was lifted out of the car and tied to the tree where Eradicate found him.

"But what became of the robbers and Tom's chest?" asked Ned.

"Um robbers go off in *Blue Bird* with chest of secrets," answered the giant.

"What does he mean—*Blue Bird*?" asked the manager.

"It's a big aeroplane painted blue," explained Tom. "The men had it hidden in a cove on the lake. It must be a hydroplane, though possibly it's a combination of both types of machine. Koku had a glimpse of it because the robbers used pocket flashlights. They put the chest in the blue aeroplane and soared off with it. Koku said he could hear the throb of the motors for a long time after they were gone."

"What's the next thing to be done?" asked Ned. "We can't do anything here, and it's getting late. Did Koku see any of the faces of these fellows?"

"They all wore masks," Tom said. "Yes, Koku, what is it?" the young inventor asked, for he noticed that his giant wanted to tell him something in addition.

Followed then more of the queer, jumbled talk of the big man, who, now and then, used some of his own words, which Tom alone could translate. Then came silence.

"He says," interpreted Tom, "that one of the men walked with a slight limp and had a queer

habit of throwing his left elbow out from his side."

"Limping! Throwing out his elbow!" excitedly cried Ned.

"Does that mean anything to you?" asked Tom.

"Does it? I should say it does. Why, that's the very thing Renwick Fawn does!"

"Renwick Fawn!" exclaimed Tom. "You mean——"

"The man who accused my father of taking the Liberty Bonds!" fairly shouted Ned. "I always thought that fellow was a crook, and now I know it. Tom, he's in with the scoundrels that robbed you!"

"Maybe," assented the young inventor. "I wouldn't put it past him, since I've had a look at his face. But if this is the case, we have several clues to work on now, Ned. The limping man with the queer elbow action, the blue aeroplane, and some other things that Koku told me. Let's go back and get busy!"

CHAPTER XXI

SCOUTING AROUND

FAIRLY well satisfied that he had secured some clues that would be of value to him, Tom Swift hurried home with Ned, Koku and Eradicate in the electric runabout. On the way the giant recovered somewhat from the rough treatment accorded him by the robbers, and talked of what he would do to them when he caught them.

"You must be hungry," suggested Ned, as they neared Shopton. For Koku had been taken away the previous midnight and evening was now coming on again.

"Me eat ten loaves of bread!" cried the giant, opening wide his enormous mouth.

"We'll give you something else, too!" chuckled Tom. "But I know poor Mrs. Baggert will almost faint when she sees you begin to eat."

The giant's appetite was always a source of wonder to the housekeeper, and now, starved as he was by his enforced fast, it might reasonably

be expected that he would clean out the pantry. Tom had the foresight to stop and telephone word to Mrs. Baggert of the situation, so she sent out and got in plenty of food before the wayfarers returned. Thus was Koku provided for.

"Well, Ned, let's get together and talk this thing over," suggested Tom to his manager, leaving the giant still eating, long after the others had finished. Eradicate, true to his promise to be friends with the big man, remained to help serve him.

"Yes," agreed Ned, "we had better make some plan to work on. But this discovery that Renwick Fawn is in the plot rather surprises me."

"I must see if Mr. Damon knows anything about him in this connection. He may have heard Blythe speak of him."

Mr. Damon was communicated with over the telephone, and after several queer "blessings" announced that, as far as he knew, Fawn was a stranger to Mr. Blythe.

"He doesn't know anything of Blodgett either," Tom told Ned, recalling the conversation Mary had overheard in the restaurant.

"Then we'll have to tackle Fawn on our own account," said Ned. "I know where he lives. Shall we go to his house and ask for him?"

"What shall we say to him if he's at home?" Tom wanted to know.

Ned thought for a moment and replied:

"We can ask him, for a starter, if he has recovered any of the Liberty Bonds he says my father took. Then, after that opening, you can mention the theft of your box and ask if Fawn thinks there is any connection between the two."

"Then what?" Tom inquired.

"Well, if things turn out the way we expect—I mean if this Fawn has really had a part in the robbery at your place—he'll get confused and maybe give himself away. That's our one hope—that he will give himself away."

"It's worth trying," decided Tom, after a little consideration. "Come on."

A little later in the evening the two young men set off in a small gasoline car to call at the home of the suspected man. Ned had had occasion to go there before some time since, months prior to the accusation against Mr. Newton.

But it was with some feelings of apprehension and with wonderings as to what they had best say to the man when he saw them that Ned and Tom walked up the steps of the Fawn home.

A maid answered the door, and when they said they had called to see Mr. Fawn she remarked:

"I think Mr. Fawn is not at home, but Mrs. Fawn is. Please come in and I will tell her you are here."

Mrs. Fawn, a small, pale, unimpressive woman, came timidly into the room where the boys waited.

"You wanted to see my husband?" she asked, and Tom jumped at once to the conclusion (in which Ned later joined) that she knew nothing of the man's peculiar activities. Their feeling that he was a brute and a bully toward her was afterward borne out by facts.

"We have some business to transact with Mr. Fawn," stated Ned. "But the maid said he wasn't at home."

"No, he isn't," answered Mrs. Fawn, and the boys did not doubt her. "He has gone to Chicago on business. At least I think it is Chicago," she added. "He goes to so many places I sometimes forget. But I know it was out West."

"Well, if he's that far off, I guess we can't see him to-night," returned Tom with a smile as he arose to go. "When did he leave town?"

"The day before yesterday," answered Mrs. Fawn.

Ned had not given his name, and though Tom had mentioned his, he did not believe Mrs. Fawn knew enough of her husband's business

to connect her callers with the bond accusation against Mr. Newton.

But the two young men glanced sharply at each other when Mrs. Fawn spoke of her husband having gone to Chicago two days previous. If that was the case he could hardly have been engaged in the theft of Tom's strong box.

"Do you want to leave any word for Mr. Fawn when he returns?" asked his wife.

"Thank you, no," answered Tom. "It wasn't important. We'll see him when he gets back."

When they were outside Ned asked:

"Well, what do you think now, Tom?"

"I don't know what to think. Koku is pretty sharp. When he says he saw a thing you can make up your mind that he did. Of course it's possible there may be two men who limp and throw out their left elbows, you know."

"It's possible, but not very probable," answered the young manager. "I believe Fawn is guilty, but his wife may not, and very likely doesn't, know anything about it. She's a meek little lady."

"Yes, indeed," agreed Tom. "Well, we're stuck for the time being. However, to-morrow is another day. Something may turn up then. Anyhow, even if it doesn't, I'm going to start out."

"Start out where?" Ned wanted to know.

"To look for that blue aero-hydroplane. I'm going to scout around in the *Blackbird* and see if I can't get on the trail of the fellows who have my chest of secrets."

"I'd like to go with you."

"Wouldn't think of taking off without you, old scout!" cried Tom.

He guided the car down the street and out on a wide avenue, going along at a steady pace and with such an evident object in view that Ned asked:

"Where are you heading?"

"I thought I'd stop at the Nestors' a minute," answered Tom.

"Then let me out here and I'll take a trolley home," said Ned.

"Let you out here! What's the idea?" cried Tom.

"Well, you're going to call on Mary, and——"

"Forget it!" laughed Tom, clapping his chum on the back. "This is a sort of joint call, and you're coming in. Mary isn't fussy that way, and she always likes to see you."

"Thanks," murmured Ned.

The two young men were no strangers in the Nestor home, Tom especially; and soon the whole family was in conversation. Tom mentioned the fact that he and his chum had just

called on Mr. Fawn but found that he had left for the West two days before.

"Left for the West!" exclaimed Mr. Nestor. "That's queer!"

"Why so?" Tom asked.

"Because I saw him in town yesterday morning. And he couldn't have been going to Chicago."

"Are you sure?" inquired Ned.

"Of course. I know the man as well as I know you. He was limping along, tossing his left elbow out every now and then as he has a habit of doing."

Ned and Tom glanced at one another. If this was the case it would explain matters. Fawn may have told his wife he was leaving for Chicago, and even have packed a bag to go. But he went to some other place and remained about Shopton long enough to take part in the robbery that night.

Mr. Nestor's mention of the peculiar gait of the man and his habit of tossing his left elbow away from his body while walking or talking was almost positive proof that there could be no mistake.

But Tom was not yet ready to let it be known that Fawn was caught in a falsehood. There were many more points to be cleared up before the affair was on the way to be solved. So,

passing the matter off as though it did not amount to much, murmuring that possibly he had misunderstood Mrs. Fawn, Tom turned the talk into other channels.

The chums left the Nestor home near midnight, Mary expressing her indignation at the loss inflicted on Tom and asking if she could not do something to help.

"I'll let you know if you can," Tom told her as he pressed her hands.

For a few minutes Tom and Ned rode on in silence, each busy with his thoughts, and then Ned asked:

"Well, Tom, what do you make of it?"

"You mean about Fawn not going to Chicago at all?"

"Yes."

"Well it means he's a trickster surely, but more than that. He's in the plot, of course. And I'm beginning to believe that it's bigger than I thought. Fawn and Barsky—both in the same town, both probably working together against dad and me. It was a sorry day when I let that so-called Russian into my shop!"

"It surely was," agreed Ned. "But it's too late to think of that now. What is the next move? I want to get my hands on Fawn, as well as on the others."

"We start scouting to-morrow morning!" de-

cided the young inventor. "It oughtn't to be hard to pick up the trail of this blue aeroplane. I had some inquiries made around Lake Carlota, and she seems to have headed west. That, naturally, would be the best place for the robbers to go—plenty of open places to land, and with widely scattered cities and towns they wouldn't run so much risk of being captured. We'll start scouting in the morning."

Accordingly the *Blackbird* was made ready. This craft was not as small nor as speedy as the *Hummer*, but she would carry three, and Tom decided to take Koku along to identify the robbers if possible.

"Good luck, Tom!" called his aged father, as he was ready to take off the next morning. "Bring back that chest!"

"I'll do my best!" was the answer.

CHAPTER XXII

A STRANGE MESSAGE

THOUGH he had no more than very slight clues on which to pursue the robbers, Tom Swift was not without a definite plan on which he proposed to operate.

As he had mentioned to Ned, he had obtained information which indicated that the big blue aeroplane, after the robbers had put the chest on board and had left Koku tied to the tree, had departed toward the west. Of course there was no guarantee that it would keep on this course, and absolutely no way of telling how long it would hold it.

"But we can stop from time to time," said Tom to Ned, "and make inquiries about the plane. A big blue aeroplane isn't easily hidden from sight."

"It sounds like good dope," agreed Ned.

Koku was no stranger to aeroplane rides, and he felt perfectly at home in the *Blackbird*. Indeed, as those of you remember who have read

the earlier books of this series, Koku was brought from his home in a strange land by an airship. He rather liked to ride in them.

So Tom, Ned and Koku flew off on their strange quest.

Up into the air soared the *Blackbird*. She was a powerful machine, and, as has been said, was roomy. Really, she was built to carry four, but on account of the size of Koku a partition between two cockpits had been taken out, making a large space where he could dispose of his enormous legs and big body.

Before starting on the search for his chest of secrets, Tom had caused inquiries to be made about the missing Barsky. But the man seemed to have disappeared completely after leaving Tom in the cistern.

"Though of course he might have been, and probably was, one of the gang that took the chest and bound Koku," suggested Ned.

For several hours the trio of adventurers soared along, not going so high but what they could from time to time make observations of the earth below them through field glasses. For of course it was possible that the blue aeroplane might be on the ground.

She also might be soaring along in the air, and Tom and Ned did not neglect to scan the heavens for signs. Once they saw a plane coast-

ing along, and gave chase. But when within good viewing distance they made out that it was one of the government mail-carriers, and they turned back on their original course.

It was near noon when Ned heard Tom give a sudden exclamation.

"See anything?" asked the young manager.

"Nothing that gives me any pleasure," replied Tom grimly. "I see a leak in one of the oil pipes and that means we've got to go down and mend it. Lucky I discovered it in time!"

An aeroplane engine, or for that matter an auto motor, that does not receive copious and continuous lubrication is going to overheat, bind and stop in a surprisingly short time.

A look over the side showed Tom that they were flying across fairly open country, and, picking out a broad meadow as a suitable landing place, he, having shut off his motor, headed for it. Koku, half asleep in his enlarged cockpit, sensed that they were going down and asked:

"We catch 'um robbers?"

"Not yet, Koku," replied Tom, with a grim laugh. "So far they are a couple of tricks ahead of us, but the game has only started."

The *Blackbird* made a perfect landing under Tom's skillful guidance, and when it had come to a stop after a run over the somewhat uneven field, Tom and Ned got out to begin work on

repairing the oil pipe. Ned had some knowledge of mechanics, and could at least help his chum.

"Is isn't as bad as I thought," Tom said, after a careful inspection. "It's just a loose union connection, and not a break. I won't have to solder anything, and I think I have a spare union in the tool box."

It was while he was looking for this and while Koku was strolling about, heaving big stones for his own amusement (and possibly with the sensation that he was thus treating his enemies) that Ned called:

"Some one's coming, Tom!"

The young inventor, who had found the union connection he was looking for, looked up and saw a farmer approaching across the field.

"Maybe he's going to order us off," suggested Ned. "We're trespassers all right. Didn't even ask his leave to drop in on him."

"No, we didn't have time," grimly chuckled Tom. "But if he makes a fuss I guess a few dollars will make him see the light of reason. I've dealt with that kind before."

However, the farmer, for such he proved to be, was a friendly person. He smiled at the chums, looked with amazement at Koku, who was lifting a rock that three ordinary men could not have handled, and then asked:

"Are you having trouble? Can I help you?"

"Thank you, very much," responded Tom. "It's only a slight defect, and I'll have it mended in a minute or two."

"We thought possibly you were coming to order us off," said Ned, as he got ready to help his chum replace the broken union on the oil feed pipe.

"Oh, no," laughed the farmer, who gave his name as Mr. Kimball. "We're getting used to aeroplanes landing here."

"You mean the government machines?" asked Tom. "I know this is their route."

"Well, a mail plane was forced down in this field last year," said Mr. Kimball. "But I didn't mean that. Only yesterday a big blue machine had to come down about where you are."

"A blue machine?" repeated Tom, concealing his excitement.

"Regular landing or a crash dive?" asked Ned.

"I guess they came down on purpose," said Mr. Kimball. "They landed gently enough—no crash. It seems they ran out of water in their radiator. That's happened to me many a time in my little Ford, so I knew just how they felt about it. I came over and showed them a spring where they could get water. Then they went on again."

Ned and Tom looked at each other. They did not want to tell too much of their plans, yet they must make inquiries and get information. Koku was still doing his "daily dozen" with the big rocks.

"How many men were in this blue machine?" asked Tom.

"Oh, four or five, I should say. Maybe half a dozen. It was the biggest aeroplane I've ever seen. But then they look a lot bigger on the ground than when they're up in the air."

"It must have been a pretty good-sized plane to carry four or five men," observed Ned. "Did you notice any of the passengers? Did one of them walk with a limp?"

"Why, yes, come to think of it, one of them did seem a bit lame," replied Mr. Kimball. "And he had a queer habit of jerking his elbow out like this," and the farmer illustrated.

"Was it his *right* elbow?" asked Tom, emphasizing the word that indicated the dexter hand.

"No—let me see now—no, it was his left. Why? Do you know him?"

"Yes," answered Ned, with a queer look at Tom. "We know him."

"I suppose they're friends of yours, both of you being in the airship business, so to speak," went on Mr. Kimball.

Neither of the young men answered that, but Tom, after he had taken off the damaged union coupling, asked:

"Did you happen to notice if one of the men had red hair?"

The farmer considered for a moment, and then replied:

"No, I didn't see any one like that."

This was not surprising, considering that Barsky's hair was so short that its redness could not be noticed until he took off his hat. And very likely he would be wearing a leather helmet in the aeroplane.

But Tom and Ned had established the fact that the blue aeroplane containing the robbers had passed this way recently. Tom made a cautious inquiry about the chest, but Mr. Kimball had not noticed that. And, very likely, it was stowed away in the fuselage of the craft, out of sight.

"How long did they stay?" asked Ned.

"Oh, only long enough to buy some food of me and take on water, then they soared away again."

"Headed west?" asked Tom.

"Headed west," answered Mr. Kimball.

The farmer remained, an interested observer, while Tom and Ned made the slight repairs needed. When they had finished and were about

to go on, Mr. Kimball, with a glance toward the giant, asked:

"Is he yours?"

"Yes, in a way," replied Tom. "Why?"

"Um! I only want to say if you ever want to get rid of him I'd like to hire him. What a hired man he'd make! My, the chores he could do without getting tired! He'd be worth three ordinary hired men—and they're so hard to get now. But I don't suppose you want to let him go?"

"No," answered Tom, with a laugh and a glance at Koku, who, to amuse himself, was tossing up great rocks and catching them in his bare hands.

"Well, I don't know as I blame you," said Mr. Kimball.

Having made repairs and gotten some unexpected and valuable information, Tom and Ned called to the giant, took their places in the machine again, and, after Koku had spun the propeller, once more were off.

All that day they traveled, Tom and his chum keeping a lookout for the blue machine, but not seeing it. The young inventor had so laid his plans that before it got too dark he descended in a broad field on the outskirts of a big city. As the aeroplane was large enough to permit of sleeping in it and as Tom had brought along

blankets, they decided to spend the night in the *Blackbird*.

It was the next morning about nine o'clock, and just about the time Tom and Ned were taking off again on the second day of their trip, that Mr. Swift was summoned to the telephone in his office.

"Dey's somebody dat wants to talk to you 'ticklar like," reported Eradicate.

"Perhaps it's a message from Tom!" exclaimed Mr. Swift. "He may have caught the robbers and gotten back his chest."

"No, sah, it don't sound like Massa Tom," said the colored man.

The voice to which the aged inventor listened was not that of his son. Instead, over the wire came strange tones asking:

"How much will you pay us for the return of your chest of secrets?"

Mr. Swift was so surprised that he almost dropped the receiver.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE BLUE MACHINE

BARTON SWIFT was the true father of his energetic son, and Tom inherited his qualities from his father. Which is to say that in his youth Barton Swift had been fully as active and quick as was now the young inventor.

Though age and illness had to some extent dimmed and enfeebled the powers of the man, still it needed but this spark—that strange telephone message—to galvanize him into action. After the first shock of hearing so unexpectedly about the stolen chest of secrets, Mr. Swift was ready to take active measures to trace the voice coming out of the machine.

“What’s that you say?” he asked, nerving himself to carry on an ordinary conversation about a most extraordinary topic. “Who are you and where are you?”

“Don’t you wish you knew?” came back the challenging inquiry. “Are you ready to talk business?”

"Of course I am," answered Mr. Swift. "We want that chest back, and we'll pay any reasonable amount."

"I'm not saying the amount will be reasonable," was the reply, and emphasis was laid on the last word. "But you'll pay our price or you don't get the chest. And I warn you that if you try to communicate with the police or set the detectives on our trail we'll immediately break off negotiations."

Trying to get in touch with the police was just what Mr. Swift was then doing. Ned Newton's father had entered the office, and, seeing him, Mr. Swift at once took pencil and paper from his desk and while he talked in a rather general way with his unseen listener, he jotted down a few words, explaining matters and suggesting that Mr. Newton go to another telephone to learn from the central operator where the mysterious call was coming from.

There were several trunk telephone lines running into the Swift office, so it was a comparatively easy matter for Mr. Newton to go to another instrument to get the information needed.

Meanwhile Mr. Swift was holding the other man in conversation. Having started Mr. Newton to ferreting out some information, the aged inventor asked:

"How much do you want to return the chest and how can I get in touch with you?"

"If you will take fifty thousand dollars in unmarked bills, make a bundle of them and bring them——"

But at that moment the criminal either heard something—perhaps the movements of Mr. Newton—or he suspected something, for he sharply broke off what he was saying and cried:

"It's all off! You're trying to double cross me! Now you'll never get your chest back!"

There was a click which told that the distant receiver was hung up, and then the line went dead.

"Wait a minute! Wait just a moment! I want to talk business with you!" cried Mr. Swift, rapidly moving the hook of the receiver up and down.

But it was too late. Only silence ensued until finally the operator, attracted by the flashing light which resulted when Mr. Swift moved the hook, asked:

"Number, please?"

"I was talking to some one, but I was cut off," said the inventor. "Can you get them back for me? It's important."

"What number were you talking to?" the girl asked.

"That's just what I want to know," said Tom's father.

"I'm sorry, but if you don't know the number I can't ring it for you."

Mr. Swift knew only too well that this was the case. It was not the girl's fault—it was the fault of the system, and not so much the fault as the limitation.

"If I had only had Tom's photo-telephone attachment hitched on here I could have seen who it was I was talking with," lamented Mr. Swift. "How about it, Mr. Newton, did you succeed in getting any information?" he asked, as the latter came away from the second instrument.

"The manager said he would try to trace the call for you," was the reply. "But I didn't have much time. Whoever it was got suspicious too quickly."

"Yes," agreed the inventor. "He must have heard me giving you the paper and he jumped to the conclusion that there was a second person in the room. Well, we'll have to wait and see what they can do for us in the central telephone office. I wish Tom were here!"

"I suppose he and Ned are on the trail of the robbers," remarked Mr. Newton.

"Yes, but this would be a good clew for them. However, it's too late now. It shows,

though, that our chest is still safe. They probably realize that they cannot make as much use of our plans, designs and patents as they thought at first."

"It's as if they stole a lot of non-negotiable securities," commented Mr. Newton. "They'll have trouble in disposing of your stuff, and they probably think that they will get more out of it by giving it back to you for a consideration than by peddling the plans about the country. In fact, no reputable manufacturer would deal with the scoundrels."

"That's true, Mr. Newton! They are scoundrels. I hope Tom catches them. As soon as he calls up, as he will sooner or later, we must tell him what has happened."

But Tom, with Ned and Koku, taking off about that same time for a further search after the mysterious blue machine, had no present intention of calling up his home, though he realized that it would be wise to get in communication with his father before very long.

"I want to have something to tell him first," said Tom to Ned. "I want to give him news that we have at least sighted the robbers."

Up and onward soared the *Blackbird*. After the night of rest, though the machine was not

the most comfortable bedroom in the world, the travelers were refreshed and ready for what the day might bring forth. They kept on the western trail, ascending at times to great heights, far above the clouds, where they had an unobstructed view of a vast expanse. This they scanned for a sight of the blue machine. But up to noon they had not sighted her.

"I think I'll circle a bit," decided Tom, as they ate a hasty lunch on board, Ned steering while Tom munched sandwiches and drank milk they had in a thermos bottle, for they had put food in the machine at the last stopping place. Then Tom managed the machine while Ned ate. As Koku was not capable of operating the *Blackbird* he could devote his whole attention to food—and it may be said that he did so.

About the middle of the afternoon, following his circling movements which resulted in nothing, Tom asked Ned to take the helm for a while.

"I want to get a bit of rest," the young inventor explained.

"Sure, give me a chance to distinguish myself," suggested Ned, who liked to handle the craft.

Tom made himself as comfortable as possible in his cockpit, and for an hour Ned guided the *Blackbird*, giving Koku the glasses with which

to make observations. The giant had remarkable sight. But even this did not succeed in bringing into view the blue machine.

Ned presently saw trouble ahead of him in the shape of ominous black clouds, and, recognizing them as a storm and not caring to trust to his abilities in this emergency, he awakened Tom.

"It's only a thunder shower," said the young inventor. "Run through it, Ned."

They had often done this, sometimes shooting up above the edge of the storm and getting into clear air higher up, and sometimes skirting the edge of the disturbance.

This time Tom Swift miscalculated the size of the storm, or else it suddenly developed larger proportions after they entered it. No sooner had the *Blackbird* pushed her beak into the bank of black clouds than Tom awoke to the realization that they were in considerable danger. Not only had they rashly entered the area of a thunder storm, but a hail storm as well.

In another instant the *Blackbird* was all but overwhelmed by a fierce wind while big hailstones fell on the wings with such force that one or two of them ripped through the stout fabric.

The thunder was like the sound of big guns

in the ears of the travelers, while the lightning hissed about them in blinding sheets and jagged forks until it seemed a miracle that they were not struck.

"This is awful!" cried Ned. "You'd better take the wheel, Tom!"

Tom thought this himself. He bent his head to the blast and endeavored to ascertain the direction of the storm that he might steer out of it.

Koku did not seem at all afraid. In fact, he always liked a storm, for it seemed to give him a chance to pit his strength against the elements. He laughed and shouted and caught up handfuls of hailstones from his cockpit, throwing them over the side.

"Stop it!" commanded Tom. "We've got trouble enough without that. Sit still!" For the giant was moving about so that he endangered the craft, tossed as it was in the furious wind.

However, Tom Swift had not managed aeroplanes several years without learning how to handle them in fair weather and foul, and in a short time he took the *Blackbird* out of the storm and up above the burst of almost tropical fury.

"Whew!" whistled Tom, when he could relax for a moment. That was a humdinger!"

"You said it!" echoed Ned. "Do you think we're damaged any?"

"Can't tell. It will be best, I think, to make a landing and look ourselves over. It will soon be time to tie up for the night, anyhow, and we might as well go down now."

"Let's take a last look for the blue machine," suggested Ned. Carefully he scanned the heavens above them and the earth below them for a sight of the robbers, but saw nothing. Then, having passed far beyond the thunder storm, they made a descent in a lonely field where they passed the night.

It was about ten o'clock the following morning and they had been under way for about an hour when Tom, using the glasses while Ned ran the *Blackbird*, suddenly uttered an exclamation.

"What is it?" asked his chum eagerly.

"The blue machine, I think!" cried Tom. "I think I see her hidden down there under some trees. Circle a bit to the left, Ned."

When this had been done, Tom meanwhile looking down, the young inventor cried:

"There she is! We've spotted them. The blue machine is down there! Now for a trick!"

CHAPTER XXIV

A NIGHT WATCH

TOM SWIFT made up his mind quickly. He generally did so in an emergency, and this was one of those times. While he still held the powerful glasses focused on that clump of trees amid the green of which he had spotted that glimpse of blue, he called to Ned:

"Put her about five points to the south!"

"The south?" cried Ned. "What's the idea!"

"I want to throw those fellows—if they're down there, as I think they are—off the track," explained Tom. "It's just a trick which may work and may not. They'll either see us or hear our motor down where they are. And if they see us sheer off to the south they may take us for a mail plane. At any rate, they may not suspect that we're after them."

"I guess that's good reasoning," murmured Ned.

Accordingly, he shifted the steering wheel

until the *Blackbird* did as many of her namesakes do when winter approaches—she headed for the south.

"How far on this course?" asked Ned as his chum continued to gaze down through the glasses.

"Just far enough to take us out of their sight. Then we'll go down."

"Go down?" cried Ned, in some surprise.

"Yes. We'll make a landing and then come back by auto. I've got it all planned out. If we try to make a landing near those fellows they'll spot us and light out, taking my chest with them. But if we go down in some spot a few miles off and then come back by auto, we can get pretty close to them before they suspect anything."

"More good dope," decided Ned, after thinking it over. "Do you think they're the fellows you want, Tom?"

"It's hard to say. That's a blue aeroplane down there, I'm sure. But whether it's the same one the robbers used isn't so sure. However, I'm taking no chances."

It did not take long for the *Blackbird* to put enough distance between her and the place where the blue aeroplane had been sighted to make it safe to descend. Now that he could no longer hold the glasses focused on the clump of

trees, Tom put them aside and took charge of his craft.

"Do you think you can get back to this same place in an auto?" Ned questioned, as they looked about for a good field in which to land.

"I think so," was the answer. "I picked out a few prominent objects by which to plot a return course.

This was all that could be done under the circumstances, and a few minutes later, noting a broad and level field below them, Tom began to guide the *Blackbird* downward.

"I hope we meet as good a chap as our farmer friend, Kimball, was," remarked Ned, as they lightly struck the grass-covered earth and taxied across it.

"I hope so," echoed Tom. "But we'll buy our way if we have to. It's important to get back as soon as we can to where those fellows are."

This landing of the *Blackbird* attracted more attention than on the occasion when the travelers landed in Mr. Kimball's field. No sooner was the machine at rest, and while Tom, Ned and Koku were alighting, than a crowd of men, women, boys and girls began to flock toward it.

"Guess they think we're giving an exhibition," laughed Ned.

"Shouldn't wonder," agreed Tom. "But the first thing we've got to do is to make sure our

machine will be all right if we leave it here. Then we've got to hire a car to get back to the place where those scoundrels are."

"A lot of work ahead of us," commented Ned.

There was little time to say more, for by this time the advance crowd of the curious ones was at the *Blackbird*. The boys, especially, would have overrun the craft and climbed up on her in their eagerness, but Tom told Koku to act as a guard. Even the sight of the giant was enough to drive back the most venturesome of the lads, while Koku's actions, in parading around the craft with a big stick he picked up served as a further effective deterrent. Curiosity, too, was about equally divided between Koku and the machine.

Among those who came rushing to the field to see why the aeroplane had landed, was the owner of the property. At first he seemed a bit belligerent, and it looked as if he would make trouble. But Tom knew just how to handle his kind.

"We want to rent this field for a while, just to store our machine here," said the young inventor in a business-like way. "I'm willing to pay well for the accommodation. And I'd like to engage you or some of your men to act as caretakers while we are away. No one must meddle with this machine!"

"I'll see to that all right," answered the farmer, who changed his manner when he learned that he was to make money out of the affair. "Now you fellows get away from here!" he cried. "This is private property and you can't trespass on it or I'll have the law on you! Move off!"

"You can't order us off, Jason Stern, unless you've got signs up saying 'no trespass,'" declared one man. "I know the law as well as you do!"

"I'll have the signs up before you can say Jack Robinson!" was the answer. "Tume," he called to a tall, lanky youth, evidently one of his hired men, "you go back to the barn and get that trespass sign I put up in my orchard when apples are ripe. Then you and Ben and Jake stand guard here. Bring my shotgun and a pitchfork or two. We'll see who's boss here!"

The farmer was evidently no favorite with his neighbors, for there were boos and hisses at this. But on the present occasion Tom Swift was just suited with this sort of man. It insured his craft being well looked after. And a little later, the crowd having been driven from the field, the hired men went on guard.

"Now, where can I hire a good automobile?" asked Tom of the farmer, who had been called Jason Stern.

"Do you mean a tin Lizzie?" asked the man. "We call them pretty good cars around here."

"They are good," conceded the young inventor. "But I'm afraid I'll need a bigger one. I've got to take him along," and he pointed to Koku who was indulging in his favorite pastime of tossing big rocks in the air and catching them to the no small astonishment of the hired men.

"Say, he is a big fellow!" exclaimed Mr. Stern. "Well, the best thing you can do is to go to Nathan's garage. Tell him I sent you and he won't gouge you on the price. He's dealt with me before," and Jason Stern said this with an air that boded no good for Mr. Nathan should the latter try any unfair tactics.

Arranging to have some one on guard over his *Blackbird* night and day until he should return, Tom and his friends set off to the village. They found Nathan's garage and quickly arranged to hire a big touring car, with room in it for Koku.

"We'll put in something to eat and take some blankets along," decided Tom. "No telling how long we may be on the road, and I don't want to have to stop and put up at a hotel. We'll either camp out in the open or sleep in the car. The nights are warm."

"Suits me," agreed Ned.

Of course saying nothing of their object, the travelers started off in the machine, Tom heading it to the north and as near as he could judge in the general direction of the bandits and where the blue machine had last been observed.

Tom Swift's training had made him a careful observer, and it was not idly that he had told Ned he had marked the place where the trees sheltered the blue aeroplane. After one or two false turns, the young inventor got on the right road, and as evening was falling he guided the machine along a country thoroughfare in a sparsely settled neighborhood.

Coming upon a lonely cabin where an aged man and his wife lived, Tom inquired whether they had heard of an aeroplane landing in that vicinity lately.

"Yep," replied the old man. "A big blue flyin' machine come down in a lot over by the river early this morning. I went over to see it. Say, I didn't ever believe there was such things. I'd never seen one before except in pictures. Hattie here, she won't believe I saw it."

"You can't tell me!" declared the man's wife. "Nobody can fly in the air! I never believed it and I never will. It's agin nature!"

Leaving the queer couple, but satisfied that they were on the right track, Tom and his companions rode on until further inquiries gave

them the information that they were within half a mile of the place where the aeroplane, for some reason, had come down.

"We'd better not take the auto very close," said Tom. "They might suspect something, though I suppose they have been as overwhelmed with curious ones as we were back there."

"It will be better to go up easy, I think," agreed Ned.

Accordingly, the auto was parked in a secluded place, and, taking Koku with them to identify the robbers should the men prove to be those under suspicion, the chums cautiously approached the clump of trees.

As they drew near they could see that a sort of camp had been established about the aeroplane which was painted blue. It was a large machine, as Koku had said.

Several men were observed moving about a small tent that had been set up, and in the light of lanterns Tom and Ned counted five separate figures. They crept near enough to overhear some of the talk.

"Well, Blodgett, what's the next move?" some one asked.

Tom nudged Ned.

"That's the man Mary heard spoken of," he whispered. "He's the one who was going to 'fix things.'"

"He seems to have done so," murmured Ned grimly. "Listen!"

"Well, we might as well divide the stuff and separate," came the answer to the one who had asked Blodgett the question. And at the sound of this voice Tom whispered:

"That's Barsky. I'm sure of it!"

"Sounds like him!" agreed Ned. "The plot is thickening!"

They listened further.

"Yes," went on the man who had suggested dividing the loot, "I tried the old man on the telephone, but he got wise and tried to catch me by sending some one to another telephone to trace the call. I don't think he succeeded, however. If we could sell him the stuff back we might make more than by separating it. But since he won't deal with us we'll have to do something else."

"We want our shares!" exclaimed another voice, and at the sound of it Ned started.

"What's the matter?" asked Tom.

"I should know who that is," was the answer. "The voice is familiar. I'm trying to think where I've heard it before."

There was some further talk among the thieves.

"What are we going to do, Tom?" asked Ned, after a while.

"Stay here on night watch for a while," was the answer. If we get a chance we'll slip in and take away the chest. I want to get it back before they start dividing the papers. If that happens I may lose some of them forever. Those fellows will likely get careless and not keep guard all night. That will give us the chance we want. Koku can pick up the chest and carry it away for us. We'll stay here and watch for a while."

It was about an hour later, while still keeping watch, that Ned caught a glimpse of a figure moving about the bandit camp. The man limped slightly, and as he was carrying a lantern Ned saw his elbow thrown out in a peculiar way.

"Renwick Fawn!" he exclaimed. "Now I know whose voice that was! It was that of the man who unjustly accused my father of taking the Liberty Bonds! Renwick Fawn is among those who robbed you, Tom!"

"Whew!" whistled the young inventor. "I should say the plot is thickening!"

CHAPTER XXV

THE ROUND-UP

TOM SWIFT felt that he was on the verge of several important discoveries, now that he had located the scoundrels in the blue machine. The knowledge that Renwick Fawn was among them was startling. So was the information that Blodgett and Barsky were one and the same person.

"I guess this whole thing was engineered when the men who were associated with Blythe found I wouldn't do business with them," whispered Tom. "I don't believe Blythe had anything to do with the plot. He just saw a good chance to make money, and he would have dealt honestly, I'm sure. But the others aren't of that type."

"Of course that accusation against my father about the Liberty Bonds has nothing to do with the theft of your box, Tom," put in Ned. "But it shows that Fawn is in with criminals, and that's enough to make me suspect him. I

shouldn't be surprised but what he stole the bonds himself."

"Maybe he did," agreed Tom. "And if they're in that machine we are going to get them back."

"How?" asked Ned.

"I'll show you," was the answer. "Wait until it gets a little later and they go to sleep, as I think they will."

Not knowing how long they would have to remain at their vigil and feeling somewhat chilly in spite of the fact that Tom had said the nights were warm, they decided to send Koku back for the blankets left in the auto. With these wrapped about them they were in better condition to remain on guard.

As the young inventor had suggested, the robbers were not particular to maintain a guard. The two friends watched the fellows cooking their evening meal and rather envied them as the odor of a savory stew came to their noses, for all Tom, Ned and Koku had were cold victuals.

Finally the camp of the robbers grew quiet, though for a time an occasional figure could be seen moving about the tent. At last even this did not occur, and Tom guessed that all were asleep.

"I'm going to slip over there and fix things

so they can't get away," Tom whispered to Ned. "Once we make sure they can't move the aeroplane and my chest, we can go back and get the police to round them up. You and Koku stay here."

"What you do, Master?" inquired the giant, in as low a voice as possible, when he saw Tom stealing out of the bushes where they were hiding.

"I'm going to put them on the blink, Koku," was the answer.

"You kill 'um while 'um sleep?" the giant asked, not understanding Tom's slang. "Let Koku kill! 'Um tie Koku up—now Koku kill!"

The giant was eager to wreak vengeance on those who had so mistreated him. But Tom said:

"Hold yourself in, you blood-thirsty man-mountain! There's going to be no killing! Anyway, I want to catch those fellows. Mr. Newton's vindication may depend on getting them alive."

Losing interest when he found he could not attack the men with his fists, Koku sank back beside Ned while Tom, as cautious as an Indian, made his way toward the camp of the scoundrels. His object was to disable the aeroplane, rendering it incapable of rising in case the men tried to make a sudden flight.

Knowing all about aircraft as he did, it was an easy matter for the young inventor to remove a small portion of the mechanism—one that would probably be the last thing to be missed by the robbers in case they looked for a reason for their machine not taking off.

"I'll just take off the distributor," decided Tom. This was a small affair of hard rubber, about as big as one's thumb, and shaped not unlike it. On it were some pieces of metal, and it rotated in the timing case, distributing the electric current to the different spark plugs in the cylinders in proper order for firing them as the gas charge entered. Without its distributor an aeroplane or a motor car is as helpless as though it had no gas.

Slipping around behind the tent and moving so cautiously that he did not disturb the sleeping men, Tom climbed up on the big blue machine. His first thought was to look for his chest of secrets, and he saw it stowed away in the fuselage. He felt a fierce desire to bring Koku there and carry away the box. But he knew this would make a noise and arouse the men. With the help of his giant, Tom knew he could have beaten off the five, but he wanted to capture them as well as get back his chest, and by crippling the aeroplane he thought this could be brought about.

Having made sure that his chest was there, though of the contents he could not be so sure, the young inventor removed the distributor from the motor and slipped back to his friends.

"Now, Ned," he told his friend, "it's your turn. Go back to the auto, ride into town and explain matters to the police. Arrange to have them assemble here at dawn and raid the place. Koku and I will remain on guard."

"Right-o!" whispered Ned, as he made ready to leave.

Several hours passed, with Tom and Koku wrapped in their blankets, waiting. The camp of the robbers remained quiet and dark.

At last there was a movement near Tom. He started, for he had fallen into a doze and for a moment he thought he was being attacked by the robbers. But Ned's voice whispered in his ear:

"I've brought the police. They've surrounded the camp and they'll make the round-up as soon as you give the word."

"Wait until it gets a bit lighter," decided Tom, for dawn was breaking. "We don't want any of them to get away."

"Koku catch 'um!" muttered the giant.

Ned had done his work well, bringing back the chief of police of Fenwick, the town near which the robbers were camped, and with the

chief came a score of men, for no chances were being taken.

A signal had been agreed upon, and when it was light enough to see, Tom gave it.

There was a concerted rush upon the camp, and the robbers were taken completely by surprise. Two tried to start the aeroplane, but though the propellers were spun there was no answering roar of the motor, for they were dead with the removal of the distributor which reposed snugly in Tom's pocket.

Some of the men showed fight, but the police soon subdued them. Koku rushed up to Renwick Fawn and, catching hold of him, shook him as a dog shakes a rat. The giant then caught Barsky and was about to bang together the heads of the two men, and probably would have killed them, when Tom cried for him to stop.

"Why stop?" demanded Koku. "'Um tie me up in knots. Now I bust 'um in mince pies!"

But he was prevailed upon to release the greatly frightened men, who were then handcuffed with the others and put in the police auto.

"Well, Barsky, you didn't think I'd get out of the cistern so easily, did you?" asked Tom of the red-haired man.

A snarl was the only answer.

"Are these yours?" asked the chief of police,

as he showed Tom a bundle of Liberty Bonds. "We found them in a tin box in the tent."

"They're mine!" cried Renwick Fawn, throwing out his elbow in the peculiar manner that identified him.

"I think they're the ones you accused my father of stealing," said Ned. "Hold on to them, Chief."

"I will, young man," was the cool answer.

Sullen and defiant, the prisoners were taken to jail. Then with Koku's help Tom's chest of secrets, with the papers, plans and patents intact, as the young inventor ascertained by a quick inspection, was taken to a storage vault in a local bank until it could be removed to Shop-ton.

"I must telephone dad the good news," Tom said, when the robbers were safely disposed of. And when Tom got into communication with Mr. Swift the latter expressed his delight and also told of the mysterious message demanding a reward for the return of the box.

"I'll pay myself the reward," chuckled Tom.

Little remains to be told. As Ned suspected, the Liberty Bonds were those stolen from the Investment Company and it was proved that Fawn had taken them. Barsky and Blodgett were one and the same, as Tom suspected, and he was one of the prime movers in the plot to

steal Tom's secrets. He and others were sent to prison for long terms.

Mr. Blythe had acted in good faith, knowing nothing of the character of the men, who, for their own selfish ends, sought to have him act for them. They had plotted to get Tom's papers, thinking that when they had possession of them they could force him to come to terms in the sale of his tidal engine and other devices.

Accordingly, after open measures had failed, trickery was resorted to. Blodgett, disguised as a Russian pattern-maker, sought and obtained employment. When he found he could not sneak away with the papers, because of the big chest, he attacked Tom, put him out of the way, and then so arranged matters that his confederates entered the place in the night, overpowered Koku, and left with the chest.

The men made good their escape, after tying Koku to the tree, and they had hoped to fly to the fastness of the western mountains, where they expected to make terms with Tom. But one of the gang, who was anxious to get cash in a hurry, persuaded them to land in the place near the trees and try to get money from the Swifts by offering to return the chest. It was this that caused the robbers to go into camp. They expected to open negotiations again over

the telephone. However, Tom spoiled their plans.

"But I'm not going to take any more chances," decided the young inventor several days later. "I'm going to have a special vault made to hold my chest of secrets."

"And when you don't have to worry about them I suppose you'll start and make something new, won't you Tom?" asked Ned.

"Yes, I guess so," was the answer. "But just now I'm going to pay a visit to a friend of mine."

And Ned knew without asking just where Tom Swift was going.

THE END

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